The New Criterion

February 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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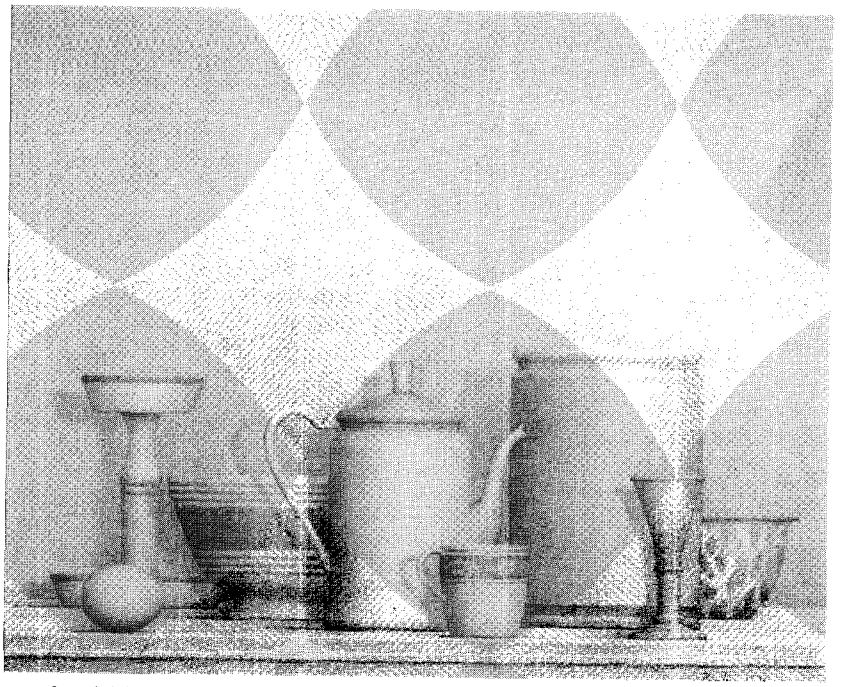

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"The Hunter Gracchus" is the title essay of a new collection of writings by Guy Davenport, which will be published in the fall by Counterpoint. Copyright © 1996 by Guy Davenport.

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Notes & Comments: February 1996

A sign of the times

Here we go again. For several years now we have watched as the cultural Left has argued that political correctness does not exist; or, if it does exist, that it's not a threat to free speech; or, if it might sometimes possibly be a threat to free speech, that policing virtue is more important than protecting free speech; or—but you get the point. One particularly clever champion of this species of cultural warfare has even declared that there is no such thing as free speech, that it would be a terrible thing if there were, and hence that "right-wing" critics of political correctness are not only wrong but also insidious. Q.E.D.

Unfortunately, reality keeps breaking in. The latest fissure comes to us from that venerable bastion of orthodoxy, the Harvard Law School. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* Op-Ed piece called "Harvard Law Caves In to the Censors," Harvey A. Silverglate, an alumnus of the law school, described the new "Sexual Harassment Guidelines" that the Harvard Law faculty put into effect last October. (The guidelines were adopted by the faculty with only one dissenting vote.) Weighing in with eleven single-spaced pages of rules and regulations, eight pages of enforcement procedures, and fifteen pages of "related materials," this totalitarian charter aims to enforce politically correct attitudes about sex and "gender roles" by sanitizing speech, scrutinizing it for evidence of incorrect prejudices. As of last October, then, "any . . . speech . . . of a sexual nature that is unwelcome" or has the effect of "creating . . . a hostile . . . environment at Harvard Law School" is verboten.

Note the vagueness and encroaching generality of the language: *any speech . . . unwelcome . . . hostile environment*. This is a commissar's pettifoggery, elastic enough to ensnare anyone deemed to require a little consciousness raising, ideological indoctrination, or simple chastisement. Henceforth, as Mr. Silverglate noted, "students with a sharp tongue (or perhaps just an independent mind) walk on egg shells at Harvard Law School." In the case of Bardell vs. Pickwick, poor Mr. Pickwick was fined £750 and thrown in jail because his landlady had (deliberately) misconstrued an innocuous note as a proposal of marriage; at Harvard Law School, the crime is not breach of promise but insufficient political rectitude. The results, however, are just as preposterous—though considerably less funny—than what Dickens portrayed in his comic novel. After all, Dickens had *intended* to be farcical.

Mr. Silverglate wrote to Robert Clark, the dean of the Harvard Law School, to express his concern about the chilling effect

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that the new sexual harassment guidelines would be likely to have on free speech. Dean Clark replied, first, that this "discussion" was "a sign of the times" (and so, presumably, beyond his control) and, second, that things could have been a lot worse: the guidelines actually adopted were as nothing compared to some that had been rejected. But this of course is cold comfort when one considers that already under the current guidelines someone's entire career can be ruined by an "inappropriate" word.

It is important to understand that the "sexual harassment guidelines" adopted at Harvard Law School, like similar speech codes adopted at other campuses, have nothing to do with encouraging good manners or fostering civility and seemliness. We are all for good manners, civility, and seemliness. But speech codes are not about etiquette. They are about power. Indeed, they are primarily instruments of intimidation and political redress, designed to aggrandize certain favored groups (the self-appointed "victims") while simultaneously penalizing other, less-favored groups. And, as Mr. Silverglate notes, at Harvard, as elsewhere, such guidelines are likely to be applied "with the all-too-familiar double standard, where only students with politically incorrect views will be charged and convicted."

Moreover, there is what we might call a metastasizing tendency in all such codes and legislation, a tendency to encroach on more and more aspects of life. This is part of what makes them totalitarian. Accordingly, no sooner had Harvard Law School promulgated guidelines to control speech bearing on sexual matters than a first-year student complained in a student newspaper that the faculty had been "short-sighted" to adopt a policy on offensive speech about sex while failing "to adopt a comparable policy on the basis of race." It is only a short jump from here to the infamous inanities of the code adopted a few years ago by Smith College, in which "lookism"—the unaccountable prejudice that some people are more attractive than others—was enrolled in the catalogue of punishable offenses against virtue.

It is a sorry spectacle. For generations the Harvard Law School has been training some of the best legal minds in the country. That such a distinguished and immensely influential institution should cravenly capitulate to the trendy political blackmail of political correctness is grounds for grave concern. Vigorous debate will more and more give way to a timid, calculating wariness. Then, too, since whatever happens at Harvard has repercussions far beyond the storied purlieus of Cambridge, Massachusetts, we can expect many other institutions to emulate Harvard's errors. Mr. Silverglate is right that the Harvard Law faculty is "about to learn that once principle is sacrificed in the name of expedience, there is no end to the demands from ever-proliferating groups of self-described victims seeking to cleanse the campus—and the classrooms—of unpleasant speech, not to mention uncomfortable ideas." This may be, as Dean Clark puts it, "a sign of the times," but if so it is an evil omen indeed.

And down in New Haven . . .

While the distinguished faculty at the Harvard Law School busied itself discouraging free speech and spreading the gospel of political rectitude, another farce was unfolding a little to the south, at Yale University. As *The New York Times* has reported at tedious length, graduate students at Yale have organized and were petitioning the university with their grievances. In a "job action" designed to coerce more money from the university, some disgruntled graduate teaching assistants even refused to turn in grades for their classes. These students recently voted to end their job action

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when the university threatened not to renew their teaching appointments. In our view, university officials were right to dismiss demands by the graduate students and to discipline those who reneged on their responsibilities to their students. As one spokesman put it, they are "students, not employees."

But this is a situation in which a pox belongs upon both houses. There can be little doubt that graduate students at Yale, like graduate students almost everywhere, are exploited as cheap labor. Teaching assistantships are notoriously poorly paid, and the rationale that they should provide a welcome "apprenticeship" for future college professors looks more and more shabby as universities increasingly rely on these cadres of relatively untrained teachers to supplement their regular professorial ranks at discount prices. In fact, Yale has been better than most institutions at requiring its "big name" professors actually to teach undergraduates. But even at Yale, the habit of fobbing off the ever more expensive education of undergraduates on teaching assistants is a pedagogical scandal waiting to be exploded. For graduate students, teaching has more and more become simply a form of financial aid instead of a genuine apprenticeship; for universities, graduate students have become more and more like a pool of migrant workers. The result is that everyone suffers—not least the undergraduates, who must be content with teachers who often command only slightly more mastery of a subject than their students.

That said, however, the behavior of the graduate students at Yale is unconscionable. The idea that students of any description should seek to organize themselves into a labor union is preposterous. The spectacle of graduate students doing so is only marginally less ridiculous than the prospect of undergraduates or high-school students doing so would be. The real business of a student is to study. That is the purpose of any education worthy of the name, all the more so in the specialized realms of graduate education. Indeed, in our opinion labor unions in general are inappropriate at colleges and universities. They are especially inappropriate among those who constitute the intellectual *raison d'être* of the institution, the faculty and the students. That we are confronted at even our elite educational institutions today not only with unionized clerical and custodial workers but also with unionized faculties and, now, unionized graduate students is no doubt yet another "sign of the times." Yet here, too, it is a sign that bodes ill for everyone concerned.

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Nora Sayre: a progressive "Journey"

by Hilton Kramer

It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive.
—Charles Péguy, *Notre Patrie,* 1905

It is a pity that no one has yet written a history of the progressive mind in America. We are just distant enough from the heyday of progressivism to have a certain perspective on its characteristic ways of looking at the world, yet we are still just close enough to its demise—or its transmutation into something else—to have some vivid firsthand memories of the peculiar intellectual deformations it visited upon our political and cultural life for something like a third of the present century. Entire areas of American life—the media and publishing worlds, the entertainment industry, the Federal bureaucracy, education, the academy, even the churches—cannot be wholly understood without a firm grasp of what the progressive outlook bequeathed to us in the years of its ascendancy, which by my calculations extend from the end of the 1920s to the mid-1960s.

Such histories of the American political Left in this period as we have been given do not really satisfy the need for a study of the progressive mind, which, though anchored in left-wing political ideology, was always a reflection of something more than a set of political positions. The progressivism I speak of was an ethos, a cast of mind, a secular faith that reached into every aspect of living and thinking. It was thus as much a code of feeling as it was a mode of thought. Its loyalties determined everything from literary taste and the choice of spouses to the way children were educated and political events responded to. At the height of its influence, progressivism had an answer—or at least a response—for every question, which is why it could not be dislodged from its position of authority in the lives of its acolytes by specific political events, no matter how shattering, but required for its demise the emergence of an ethos even more radical and comprehensive and compelling in its prescriptions for life than the system of belief it supplanted. It is in this respect that the counterculture of the late Sixties and early Seventies, with its call for a more fundamental personal emancipation, may be said to have devoured the remnants of a once-regnant progressivism and propelled its progeny into a radicalism of a very different sort.

In speaking of the progressive mind in America we must distinguish, of course, between the ideas and attitudes propagated earlier in the century by the reform movements associated with Theodore Roosevelt, Robert M. La Follette, and William Jennings Bryan, and the very different kind of progressivism that came to be identified, to one degree or another, with an allegiance to Stalinist fellow-traveling. Used in this latter sense, the word "progressive," once so common in political parlance, isn't much heard

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anymore in discussions of the radical Left in this country. It seems to have become a casualty of the Cold War.[1] Conservatives, at least those old enough to have become familiar with the term in their youth, shun the very notion of progressivism as a euphemism for Stalinism itself—which, indeed, it very much still was when I was in school in the late Forties and early Fifties. Many liberals, especially those old enough to have experienced the duplicities of the Communists at first hand, avoid the word for the same reason. Yet even among people on the hard Left, progressive is a term that has lost its luster. It seems dated and a little tarnished—a throwback, perhaps, to an era more receptive to Marxist-inspired political causes than our own. Progressive is, in any event, too old-fashioned a term to serve the up-to-date purposes of the radical Left today, which are more likely to exploit the issues of race, sex, the environment, social welfare, and multiculturalism than to advocate Marxist-Leninist notions of revolution. Revolution of some sort had always, of course, been the subtext of Soviet-oriented American progressivism, but it was a subtext that dared not speak its name too loudly in public lest more moderate liberals, upon whom progressives were dependent for allies and access, be reminded of what progressive politics was really about.

All the same, no other word will do to describe the kind of Left-liberal mentality that once played so large a role in shaping American cultural life and the social thought on which it was based. In its heyday, progressivism always occupied a much larger place in American cultural life than Communism itself. For progressives, thanks to their liberal allies and patrons, often had easy entrée to milieux where known Communists were not entirely welcome. While all Communists were, in their public utterances at least, progressives, not all progressives were Communists—which is to say, under Communist Party discipline. Progressivism may thus be said to have represented the laity of the Communist movement in the Stalinist era, and as with any given faith, the style of obeisance to fundamental articles of belief naturally varied a good deal within its ranks.

Hollywood progressives, for example, differed markedly from their counterparts in the industrial labor movement. Comfortably situated progressives on *The New Yorker*, conforming to the ethos of their own subculture, tended to be more insouciant in their radicalism than, say, writers for *The Nation*. So, too, their respective progressive readers. And so it went. Harvard progressives were often more snobbish than those at City College, while Berkeley produced a community of progressives that differed from both.

Yet despite these differences in style, class, and disposition, what made these progressives an identifiable force in American cultural life were precisely the articles of belief they held in common, and foremost among them was a vision of American life—a vision of life itself—that was largely Stalinist in origin. Never mind what was actually taking place in the real-life Soviet Union in Stalin's time. About that, for the most part, progressives of every stripe were marvelously adept at keeping themselves in a highly adaptable condition of disbelief. What was of compelling concern to them was life in the United States, which progressives viewed almost entirely in terms that were codified by the Communist Party line as it evolved in the course of its many modifications, permutations, and outright reversals to meet the needs of Soviet power. About a whole range of historic events and public

1 See, for example, *The Reader's Companion to American History*, edited by Eric Foner and John A. Garraty and sponsored by the Society of American Historians, published in 1991. The entry for "Progressivism," written by Robert M. Crunden, makes no reference to the Soviet-oriented progressivism I speak of here. In this connection, it should also be noted that while the book contains an entry for "Anticommunism," written by Ellen W. Schrecker, there is none for "Communism," though there is a brief, unsigned entry for the "Communist Party."

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figures—from the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the Spanish Civil War to the Alger Hiss conviction and the Hollywood Ten—progressives adopted an iconography and a demonology that have remained impervious to critical doubt or documentary evidence down to the present day. Which is why there has been no discernible impact on what remains of the progressive mind by the revelations lately emanating from the KGB archives in Russia. The verifiable facts of history had long ago ceased to be relevant to the progressives' act of faith.

I have been reminded of all this once again by the new book that Nora Sayre has written about herself, her parents, their friends, her friends, their respective political allegiances, and her own unrepentant attachment to the old progressive sentimentalities.[2] Entitled, somewhat misleadingly, *Previous Convictions: A Journey Through the 1950s*, the book aspires to illuminate a much larger chunk of history than the despised decade in which Sayre herself came of age and upon which she now looks back with so much distaste. For this is a book that eulogizes the Twenties, gives us a kind of Popular Front cartoon version of the Thirties, castigates the Fifties, sentimentalizes the Sixties, and brings us up-to-date on what was left of the progressive platitudes well into the Eighties and Nineties.

About the Twenties, Sayre writes in a spirit of unembarrassed filial piety. The Twenties was the glamorous decade that shaped her parents' lives and thus, in Sayre's view, set a standard for how life should be lived that has never again been met. Her father, Joel Sayre, had worked on the old *New York Herald-Tribune*, made a middling reputation on *The New Yorker*, and, as Nora Sayre writes, "spent about five years in Hollywood, employed on over a dozen film projects." Later he wrote for television. Her mother, Gertrude Lynahan, was also a journalist. Her career, it is said, "was abetted by H. L. Mencken." In the Twenties she worked on *The New York World* at a time when Joseph Mitchell, later a colleague of her husband's at *The New Yorker*, was a copy boy there. John O'Hara was Nora Sayre's godfather. Other members of her parents' circle included Nunnally Johnson, James Thurber, James M. Cain, St. Claire McKelway, S. J. Perelman, Dorothy Parker, and Edmund Wilson, the latter a neighbor of the Sayres on the Upper East Side of Manhattan when Nora was growing up—one of the children, as she writes, "who passed the crackers and cheese and refilled the ice trays" at their parents' cocktail parties and "felt colorless in comparison to our seniors."

> When I remember my parents' friends [she writes], I think of them indoors, in living rooms, laughing, eating salted nuts and drinking whiskey, talking expansively—with a group rather than to one person. The setting would shift from New York to Beverly Hills and Cape Cod, occasionally to Connecticut. And one or two guests might spend the night, perhaps on sofas: next morning there would be the long silent trip to the bathroom, the speechless breakfast, and then a few jokes about hangovers. But no perceptible remorse.

In a show of progressive conscience, Sayre expresses some concern that "it may seem that I've confined myself to an elite" in the writing of *Previous Convictions*, but she hastens to add that "most of the writers of the Twenties and the radicals of the Thirties"—in other words, the figures under discussion in this book—"had made their own way—through their work." In their work, whether for the commercial press in New York or for the Hollywood studios, Sayre believes that these models of progressive virtue scorned commercialism, but her own account of their careers doesn't support such a claim. In her father's case, for example, she makes it perfectly clear that he sought work in Hollywood in order to meet his family's needs. His wife had suffered an irreversible breakdown and needed care. In

2 *Previous Convictions: A Journey Through the 1950s*, by Nora Sayre; Rutgers University Press, 462 pages, $37.95.

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addition, he wanted his daughter to attend Radcliffe College. Both required more money than Joel Sayre could make at *The New Yorker*. I think he behaved admirably in attending to the needs of his nearest and dearest, but why claim that this deliberate embrace of commercialism was the exact opposite of what Joel Sayre required of himself? Well, because commercialism represents a fall from honor in the progressive lexicon, and so must be denied even where the motive for it is easily explained.

It is in telltale details of this sort—and they become more flagrant and more abundant when Nora Sayre turns to "the radicals of the Thirties"—that we come to understand the peculiar variety of progressivism that pervades *Previous Convictions*, which its author characterizes as both "a memoir of mentalities" and "a book of ruminations." For hers is a progressivism of nostalgia—a progressivism compounded almost exclusively of other people's fond memories and cherished illusions and her own uncontainable envy for a time and a milieu in which an unclouded Left-liberal outlook on politics and a debonair style in art and life were joined in joyous opposition to what was otherwise seen to be a benighted society of ignoramuses and reactionaries. In other words, Menckenism adapted to the needs of middlebrow journalism and radical chic.

The envy which Sayre still harbors for this happy breed of debonair *révoltés* gives to everything she writes a distinct air of belatedness, a feeling that she and her generation arrived on the scene after the partying was over and only the debris—the hangovers, the recriminations, the denials of wrongdoing, the breakdowns—remained as souvenirs of better times. Feeling dispossessed of those better times, which Sayre identifies exclusively with her parents and their circle, she certainly understands that she was born too late to participate in their experience, yet she seems nonetheless to have adopted their characteristic attitudes—attitudes that became fixed in the Twenties and Thirties—as her own. These, not surprisingly, she soon found to be woefully inapplicable to life in the Fifties, and as a consequence she bitterly condemns the Fifties as "a bad time to be very young, a bad time to enter the early chapters of your life, bad for curiosity or the impulse to explore."

It seems never to have occurred to her—even now, some forty-odd years later—that others, especially those born neither to her advantages nor to her disappointments, might look back on the Fifties with very different feelings, might indeed have reason to look back on the Fifties as better times than any we have seen since. But then, for some of us who were young in the Fifties, the parochial world into which Sayre was born—*The New Yorker* of Harold Ross and the Hollywood of the big studios—did not, after all, represent the summit of human achievement. For that matter, it did not represent the summit of journalistic or cinematic achievement. We read *The New Yorker* for the cartoons, for the criticism of Edmund Wilson and Louise Bogan, and for occasional outside contributors like Rebecca West, W. H. Auden, and V. S. Pritchett. Hollywood movies we went to for entertainment, just as we did when we were kids, not for art or edification, and we went to them a good deal less often once foreign films—movies for grownups, as I came to think of them—were readily available to us. In the arts, the critics whose writings meant the most to us—Clement Greenberg, B. H. Haggin, Virgil Thomson, Edwin Denby, Eric Bentley, Harold Clurman, Manny Farber—never appeared in *The New Yorker*, and most of those who did were better known for their wisecracks than for their critical sagacity. If we made allowances for a writer such as Dwight Macdonald, which in those days we did, it was largely because he had made his reputation in *Partisan Review*, and even in the Fifties his most audacious writing continued to be published by *Partisan* or *Commentary*, not *The New Yorker*.

For a sentimental progressive like Nora Sayre, however, the intellectual milieu represented by *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*,

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Encounter, and a handful of literary quarterlies remains enemy territory even in retrospect. For one thing, it was too highbrow in its tastes; its views of popular culture were far more critical than that of the middlebrow contributors to *The New Yorker*. For another, it espoused the wrong kind of politics; it was anti-Communist. Above all, it was merciless in exposing the fallacies of the progressive mind, not only in its political sentiments but for its literary and cultural pieties as well. In the Fifties, writes Sayre in *Previous Convictions*, "her family's friends . . . thought the Cold War anti-Communists were extremely stupid," and over the course of the last forty years this anti-anti-Communist stance—in many respects, the last refuge of progressive orthodoxy—has evolved in Sayre's mind into a moral absolute. It made her earlier books —*Sixties Going On Seventies* (1973), a collection of journalistic pieces on the anti-Vietnam War movement and the counterculture, and *Running Time: Films of the Cold War* (1982), an attempt to anti-anti-Communist Hollywood history—little more than progressive caricatures of their respective genres. Except in one respect—Sayre's touching account of her father's life—the same moral imperative makes *Previous Convictions* a repository of all the most discredited progressive myths that have accumulated about the Thirties and the Fifties. In Nora Sayre's progressive "journey" through the Fifties, *Partisan Review* is seen to have sold out to American conformity because of its anti-Communist position in the Cold War, Alger Hiss is thought to be guilty of nothing more than acting like a New Deal liberal, and the real political saints and martyrs of the decade are veteran Stalinist types like Donald Ogden Stewart and his wife, Ella Winter, the widow of Lincoln Steffens, living in comfortable political exile in London, and the Hollywood Ten, some of whom were still under Communist Party discipline. It is in such particulars that the progressivism of nostalgia degenerates into sheer fantasy and denial.

At times, to be sure, it is difficult to know whether Sayre is as flat-out ignorant of some of the figures she admires or is merely—how should one put it?—disingenuous. Malcolm Cowley, for example, is a figure Sayre much admires, and there is indeed something to admire in Cowley's purely literary endeavors. Yet in *Previous Convictions*, Sayre praises Cowley for, of all things, his politics, which in the Thirties were largely party-line Stalinism. She cites two long letters written to Cowley by James Thurber in the Thirties in which the latter, as Sayre writes, "accused the Communists of trying 'to put the artist in a uniform so like the uniform of the subway conductor that nobody would be able to tell the difference,' and of a 'desire to regiment and discipline art.' " Presciently, Thurber even expressed a fear that "the Communists [were] contributing to 'the growing menace of fascism.' "

Yet it never occurs to Sayre to wonder why Thurber would have been writing such things to Cowley at that particular moment in history if, indeed, Cowley was as independent in his politics as she foolishly claims him to have been. No doubt it would have been a violation of progressive piety for Sayre to have reminded her readers that even Edmund Wilson—not your garden-variety Red-baiting reactionary, as even Sayre would concede—was moved to write as follows to Cowley, then still reigning as the literary editor of a very progressive *New Republic*, in October 1938:

> What in God's name has happened to you? I was told some time ago that you were circulating a letter asking endorsements of the last batch of Moscow trials—though you had just published articles in which, as far as I could tell, you were trying to express a certain amount of skepticism. I don't suppose you're a member of the C.P.; and I can't imagine any other inducement short of bribery or blackmail—which sometimes appear in rather inobvious forms and to which I hope you haven't fallen a victim—to justify and imitate their practices at this time. You're a great

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> guy to talk about the value of a non-partisan literary review after the way you've been plugging the damned old Stalinist line . . . at the expense of the interests of literature and to the detriment of critical standards in general!

That's why Thurber was protesting to Malcolm Cowley, who was more brutally described by James T. Farrell as the "literary mouthpiece" of the Communist Party in the Thirties; but this is not the kind of historical intelligence that Nora Sayre regards as relevant to her progressive-valentine account of Cowley in the Thirties. Nor does Sayre bother to point out that it wasn't until fifty years later—in the 1980s!—that Cowley deigned to acknowledge that he might have made some mistakes about "Russia" in the Thirties, and even at that late date used the occasion to revive his old quarrel with the anti-Stalinists at *Partisan Review*. For his politics and his illusions, Cowley is clearly one of Sayre's role models.

Another seems to be Lillian Hellman, for there is much in *Previous Convictions* that reads like a distended remake of *Scoundrel Time*, with Donald Ogden Stewart and Ella Winter performing the roles originated by Dashiell Hammett and Hellman herself—the roles of romantic victims of political persecution rather than (what in fact they were) privileged and prevaricating apologists for a terrible political tyranny. As in *Scoundrel Time*, the writers and intellectuals associated with *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* are looked upon in *Previous Convictions* as greater enemies of American democracy than the followers of the Communist Party, for the former are seen to have failed the tests of progressive orthodoxy. This fantasy history repeats itself in the form of farce, but there is more than enough in *Previous Convictions* to remind us of what a malevolent farce the progressive mind itself has turned out to be.

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The qualities of Robert Musil

by Roger Kimball

"Why, then, aren't we realists?" Ulrich asked himself. Neither of them was, neither he nor she: their ideas and their conduct had long left no doubt of that; but they were *nihilists and activists, sometimes one and sometimes the other, whichever happened to come up.*
—Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*

In the realm of the aesthetic . . . even imperfection and lack of completion have their value.
—Robert Musil, *"Address at the Memorial Service for Rilke in Berlin" (1927)*

The Austrian novelist Robert Musil (1880–1942) occupies a peculiar position in the pantheon of great twentieth-century writers. He is admired by literati for a handful of astringent modernist fictions, especially for his first novel, *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (*The Bewilderments of the Schoolboy Törless*). This brutal yet seductively introspective tale of adolescent cruelty and sexual exploitation at a German military boarding school was published to instant critical acclaim in 1906, when Musil was only twenty-six. (Later, in the 1930s and 1940s, *Törless* was hailed as a prescient allegory of the spiritual deformations of the Nazi era.)

Musil's play *Die Schwärmer* (1921, *The Enthusiasts*) explores that favored modern topic, the collapse of traditional bourgeois ideals; its taut language and intense dramatization won it the Kleist Prize in 1923 and, eventually, a regular spot in the German theatrical repertory. *Drei Frauen* (1924, *Three Women*), a celebrated suite of three novellas, plumbs the relationship between eroticism (generally unhappy) and transcendence—one of Musil's staple themes.

Then there are Musil's essays, some of which are masterpieces of ironic cultural commentary. "Uber die Dummheit" ("On Stupidity"), a lecture that Musil delivered in Vienna in 1937, deserves special mention for its signal contemporary relevance. Particularly pertinent is its withering analysis of "the higher, pretentious form of stupidity"—the "real disease of culture," in Musil's opinion, which infiltrates even "the highest intellectual sphere" and has repercussions throughout society. "The examples," he dryly notes, "are pretty blatant."[1] As indeed they are. Finally, some of Musil's short prose pieces, collected in *Nachlass zu Lebzeiten* (1936, *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*), rival Kafka's fables in their vertiginous humor and enigmatic creepiness.

All of Musil's works (the German edition of which runs to nine volumes) have their partisans and admirers. But for most of us, Robert Musil is first and foremost the author of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*), a book in which

1 An English version of this essay appears in *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, by Robert Musil, edited and translated by Burton Pike and David S. Luft (University of Chicago Press, 301 pages, $29.95; $16.95 paper).

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the major themes of his earlier works coalesce to form a novelistic tapestry of extraordinary wit, complexity, and intelligence.

It is worth stressing the wit. *The Man Without Qualities*, the book upon which Musil's claim to greatness chiefly rests, is regularly cited alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*, Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, and Hermann Broch's *Die Schlafwandler* as a triumph of high modernism. Like those other novels, *The Man Without Qualities* is a book of weighty seriousness and deep erudition. It is also, in parts, an exceptionally funny book. Few readers with any sympathy for Musil's writing will be able to read far without laughing aloud, at least as they make their way through the first volume. Whatever else one can say about it, *The Man Without Qualities* stands as one of the great modern works of satire.

Set in Vienna in 1913, it depicts a world on the edge of a precipice—the moral, cultural, political precipice that was to give way to the abyss of World War I the following year. But it turns out that, in Musil's hands, peregrinations at the brink of disaster are as amusing as they are poignant; and Musil's man without qualities—a gifted, amoral, concupiscent mathematician of good family named Ulrich—is one of the most engaging comic anti-heroes in modern fiction.

It almost goes without saying that *The Man Without Qualities* is a peculiar book, or set of books. Like the other great novels just mentioned, it is monumental—in its literary ambition, its intellectual sophistication, and, not least, in its length. Certainly, as Dr. Johnson said of *Paradise Lost*, "none ever wished it longer than it is." Musil began working on *The Man Without Qualities* in 1924. He published the first volume—some thousand pages—in 1930, and the first part of the second volume in 1933 (for which he was awarded that year's Goethe Prize).

Under pressure from his publisher, who had been steadily advancing him money for years, Musil reluctantly began preparing the second part of the second volume for publication in the late 1930s. By then, Musil and his wife Martha, a painter whose parents were assimilated Jews, were living in penurious exile from the Nazis in Switzerland. An energetic (not to say fanatical) rewriter—a literary perfectionist, really—Musil had retrieved the galleys from the printer and was in the process of extensively reworking them when, in April 1942 at the age of sixty-two, he suddenly collapsed from a cerebral hemorrhage and died. Apparently, he succumbed while performing his morning gymnastics (another activity to which he was fanatically devoted). According to his widow, who found him a short while later, the look on his face was one of "mockery and mild astonishment."

We really have no idea how Musil intended to end *The Man Without Qualities*. Probably, the last section would have been titled "A Sort of Ending" to mirror the opening sequence, "A Sort of Introduction." He once said that he wanted to conclude the book in the middle of a sentence, with a comma. Be that as it may, in addition to the twenty chapters in half-corrected galley proof, there exist dozens of draft chapters as well as voluminous notes, character sketches, alternative chapters, and miscellaneous jottings related to the book. Musil's widow published the second part of the second volume in 1943. The "complete" German edition of this incomplete novel was published in 1951.

The first English translation of *The Man Without Qualities* was by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser, who also collaborated on translations of *Törless* and some of Musil's stories. Published in three volumes from 1954 to 1960, this edition included all of the novel that Musil published during his lifetime (all of volume one and the first thirty-eight chapters of volume two). A projected fourth volume was to contain the posthumously published chapters and notes. Although incomplete, the Wilkins–Kaiser translation remains a sound introduction to *The Man Without Qualities*: the translation

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is fluent, and a prefatory essay provides an excellent précis of Musil's career.

The one clear advantage of the new, two-volume translation of *The Man Without Qualities*[2] by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike is that it contains Musil's posthumously published chapters. It also contains several hundred pages of Musil's notes, sketches, and alternative versions of chapters. While some of this material will interest readers of the novel (as distinct from those who prefer to dissect it), much of it will command the attention only of Musil specialists. It must be said, too, that shoehorning all of this material into only two volumes has bloated the second volume to tumid, phone-book proportions: a pity, not only because it makes the book difficult to handle, but also because it seems unfair to the striking and elegant jacket design that Knopf provided.

In an afterword, Burton Pike tells us that "the translator's intention was to have the writing startle the reader in English in the same way it startles a reader in German." In the event, he and his co-translator have produced a version of the novel that is generally a bit more literal than the previous translation; whether it is always quite as readable is another question. It is perhaps an improvement to translate "Haus und Wohnung des Mannes ohne Eigenschaften" as "House and home of the man without qualities" (Wilkins–Pike) instead of "Abode of the Man Without Qualities" (Wilkins–Kaiser); or to render "ein leichter Geruch von verbranntem Pferdehaar" as "a whiff of burnt horsehair" (W–P) rather than "a faint whiff of brimstone" (W–K)—though given the presence of the devil in the previous clause, there is surely something to be said for "brimstone."

In any event, other decisions in the new translation are more dubious. For example, Wilkins–Kaiser translated the second part of the first volume, "Seinesgleichen geschieht," as "The Like of It Now Happens." If nothing else, this does have the advantage of more or less accurately rendering the German. The Wilkins–Pike alternative—"Pseudoreality Prevails"—may indeed fulfill Mr. Pike's ambition to "startle the reader." The problem is that it would probably have startled the author as well: presumably, if Musil had wanted "Pseudoreality Prevails" he would have written it.

Not that translating Musil is an easy task. Indeed, nothing about Musil is easy. Writing some years ago about *The Bewilderments of the Schoolboy Törless*, the critic John Simon noted that whatever Musil touched "was or became difficult. Simplicity was not for him: in style, thought, or life." For readers of an English translation of Musil's magnum opus, the difficulties begin with the book's title. For while *Eigenschaften* can indeed mean "qualities," it carries with it a penumbra of associations that no English word quite captures. "Qualities," "properties," "attributes"—*Eigenschaften* can mean any or all of these things. But it suggests something more. *Eigen* is the German word for "own," as in "for one's own use." Hence the *eigen* in *Eigenschaften* insinuates a sense of self-possession that remains inexplicit in the English approximations. To speak of a man without *Eigenschaften* is therefore not so much to deny that he exhibits any definite qualities but rather to suggest that whatever qualities he displays are not really *his*. To be without *Eigenschaften* is in this sense to be without character—that inscribed residuum of identity that makes us who we are—though to be without character is by no means to be anonymous. As Ulrich admits to himself, "he was, after all, a character, even without having one."

For readers in the habit of opposing the claims of science to those of art, part of what makes Musil difficult is the way that he complicates the Romantic impulse to champion art as a kind of escape or redemption from unpalatable scientific truths. I will have more to say about this subject—a key theme in *The Man Without Qualities*—

2 *The Man Without Qualities*, by Robert Musil, translated by Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike; Knopf, 1,774 pages, $60 (two-volume boxed set).

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below. But for now it is enough to note Musil was himself of a scientific bent by temperament and training (or perhaps by temperament because of training). Not for nothing was *Genauigkeit* ("precision," "accuracy," "exactness") one of his favorite words. And Musil was *genau* in everything: dress, speech, manner, and intellectual comportment. As he put it in one essay, "If I want to have a worldview, then I must view the world. That is, I must establish the facts."

Musil had great respect for facts, and for the procedures science had devised for obtaining them. His education was primarily technical, not literary. The only son of the knighted engineer Hofrat Alfred Edler von Musil, Robert was sent at a young age to military school, first at Eisenstadt and then at Weisskirchen, the latter providing the inspiration for the dismal institution that Musil portrayed in *Törless*. (Asked later whether the school was the original for the "W." of *Törless*, Musil laughed and said that the fictional school was as nothing compared to the reality.)

In 1897, the year in which he began writing in earnest, Musil went to study civil engineering. He took a diploma from the Technical University in Brno in 1901, and, after doing his military service, spent a year working in the engineering laboratories in Stuttgart. He then went to Berlin, where he studied psychology, logic, and philosophy (the gloomy Maurice Maeterlinck and, later, Emerson and Nietzsche were particularly important influences). His doctorate, under Karl Stumpf, was on the epistemology of the great Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach (1838–1916), about whom William James once remarked that he appeared to have read and thought about everything. And although Musil decided against pursuing an academic career, he remained deeply interested in empirical science. He was even something of an inventor. Early on, he invented a chromatometer. This device, an earlier version of which was invented by Newton, resolves all the colors of the spectrum into whiteness—an appropriate invention, as one commentator has observed, for the author of a book called *The Man Without Qualities*.

But the portrait of Robert Musil, technician, is not of course the whole story. If Musil was the son of an engineer, he was also the son of a tempestuous, artistically inclined mother, Hermine. As a boy, he was socially withdrawn, often sickly, but also defiant and—in the schoolyard, anyway—effectively pugilistic. Although he was baptized Catholic, his parents were ardent secularists, and Robert was brought up without religious instruction. Nevertheless, Musil later developed an intense "outsider's" interest in religion. In one place he describes Ulrich as "a religious person who simply happened to believe in nothing at the moment"—not a bad definition of Musil himself—and he lards the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities* with quotations from various classics of mystical literature.

Musil's early family life was calculated to breed complication. Apparently with the acquiescence of her husband, Hermine maintained what amounted to a *ménage à trois* with one Heinrich Reiter, who met the family in 1881, shortly after Robert was born. As he grew older, Musil quite naturally came to resent Reiter and to despise his father. About his mother he seems to have entertained a mixture of indifference and contempt. In view of her notable accomplishments as an amateur pianist, the contempt no doubt continued to show itself in Musil's unusual hostility to music when he was an adult; his indifference seems to have been reciprocated by both parents.

The erotic irregularity of the Musil household later had profound echoes in Robert's fiction—as did an earlier tragedy. Musil's only sibling, Elsa, died in infancy before he was born. Although he never knew her, the image of this lost sister came to haunt him as the embodiment of an unobtainable unity and wholeness: an alter ego or "other half" such as Aristophanes famously described in his speech about the nature of love in Plato's *Symposium*. She

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would come back as Agathe, Ulrich's "forgotten sister," in the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities*.

It must also be understood that Musil, born in 1880 in Klagenfurth, southern Austria, was very much a product of the hothouse atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. This was an atmosphere in which, as the historian Carl Schorske put it, "the usual moralistic culture of the European bourgeoisie was . . . both overlaid and undermined by an amoral *Gefühlskultur* [sentimental culture]." As Schorske went on to note, this revolution in sensibility amounted to a crisis of morality—Hermann Broch called it a "value vacuum"—that quickly precipitated a crisis in liberal cultural and political life *tout court*. "Narcissism and a hypertrophy of the life of feeling were the consequence," he continued.

> The threat of the political mass movements lent new intensity to this already present trend by weakening the traditional liberal confidence in its own legacy of rationality, moral law, and progress. Art became transformed from an ornament to an essence, from an expression of value to a source of value.

Of course, these transformations were a catalyst for disaster. The resources of civilization—epitomized by the faith in rationality, moral law, and progress that Schorske mentions—were hollowed out from within; weightless, they soon lost the capacity to resist the barbarism of feeling—aesthetic, sexual, social, political feeling—that rushed in everywhere that a spiritual vacancy was felt. It was, as the Marxists used to say, "no accident" that Nazism and other extreme movements got their start in this narcotic environment. Musil put it in terms of the credit system:

> In love as in business, in science as in the long jump, one has to believe before one can win and score, so how can it be otherwise for life as a whole? However well founded an order may be, it always rests in part on a voluntary faith in it, a faith that, in fact, always marks the spot where the new growth begins, as in a plant; once this unaccountable and uninsurable faith is used up, the collapse soon follows; epochs and empires crumble no differently from business concerns when they lose their credit.

Musil's contemporary Hugo von Hofmannsthal spoke in this context of *das Gleitende*: the slipping away of the world in an access of aestheticized sentimentality. To locate Musil within the folds of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna is not to say that he preferred his spirituality *mit Schlag*, as it were. In many respects, he vigorously rebelled against the *Gefühlskultur* that Schorske evokes; but he also, in other crucial respects, capitulated to it. *The Man Without Qualities* contains a record of both activities.

There was at any rate a great deal in Musil's background and milieu to complicate and enlarge his "technical" temperament. What he wanted was not *Genauigkeit* alone but rather *Genauigkeit und Seele*, "precision and soul." The supremely empirical Musil emerges as a champion of spiritual values in the face of the twin threats of desiccating rationalism and enthusiastic irrationalism. Which is to say that Musil was both a partisan of "soul," and that he was a sharp and exceedingly entertaining critic of "Soul"—upper case and in scare quotes.

It was in fact the union of his commitment to *Genauigkeit* with a thoroughgoing revulsion to what we might call spiritual sentimentality that fueled his most penetrating observations about the modern condition. In this, as in other respects, Musil sought to emulate the thinker who probably most deeply influenced his understanding of cultural matters, Friedrich Nietzsche. Indeed, *The Man Without Qualities* may be seen as an attempt to continue Nietzsche's anatomy of nihilism in the form of a novel. Its large ambition is to diagnose and, in its way, to treat the "mysterious" even "imponderable" disease of an age that breeds men without qualities.

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In his 1924 essay on Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann observed that "the spiritual essay" or "intellectual novel" was the dominant contemporary form of fiction. His own greatest novels (*The Magic Mountain*, *Doctor Faustus*) certainly answer to that description, as do many other classics of modernism. Broch's *Sleepwalkers* even has a long essay ("The Disintegration of Values," a very Musilian topic) distributed throughout it in short sections. Yet *The Man Without Qualities* was probably the most self-consciously essayistic of all these novels.

It's not simply that the book often reads like a series of essays, with its short, discursive chapters, its many quotations and allusions, and its wry chapter titles: "4. If there is a sense of reality, there must also be a sense of possibility"; "12. The lady whose love Ulrich won after a conversation about sports and mysticism"; "13. A racehorse of genius crystallizes the recognition of being a man without qualities," etc. Musil mimicked the essay form in order to enjoy something of the *authority* of assertion without incurring all of its responsibilities.

Although potentially disingenuous, this procedure offers the novelist one way to explore that hazy territory between the simple indicative, which outstrips his knowledge, and the frankly fictional, which seems insufficiently urgent. In a 1914 piece on the essay form, Musil defined the genre as "the strictest form attainable in an area where one can*not* work precisely." The essay, he wrote, "takes its form and method from science, its matter from art." In the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities*, the narrator observes that "a man who wants the truth becomes a scholar; a man who wants to give free play to his subjectivity may become a writer; but what should a man do who wants something in between?" The short answer, no doubt, is that he writes *The Man Without Qualities*.

In Musil's mind, the essay form was deeply connected to a major theme of *The Man Without Qualities*, the aestheticized view of the world that results from an inflated sense of possibility. More so even than most novels, *The Man Without Qualities* was written *sub specie possibilitatis*, under the aspect of possibility; its dominant mood is the subjunctive; Ulrich, the man without qualities, is one in whom the sense of possibility is overdeveloped—or, what amounts to the same thing, one in whom the sense of reality is in abeyance. A man with an ordinary sense of reality, Musil explains, nibbles at the "hook" of life without being aware of the line; but "a man with that sense of reality which can also be called a sense of possibility trawls a line through the water and has no idea whether there's any bait on it. His extraordinary indifference to the life snapping at the bait is matched by the risk he runs of doing utterly eccentric things."

Initially liberating, the triumph of possibility over reality is in the end an invitation to despair—something that Musil himself seems to have discovered along with Ulrich. But the pattern of Ulrich's escapades and interactions with others, especially in the first volume, presupposes the supremacy of possibility, as does the form—and, finally, the ultimate formlessness—of *The Man Without Qualities*.

Although Musil was in the process of veering off in many other directions in the last years he worked on the book, the portions that he actually published center largely around Ulrich. We never learn his last name (one symptom, perhaps, of his lack of qualities), but we do know quite a bit about Ulrich. The only son of a well-to-do lawyer of some scholarly achievement and pronounced pedantic tendencies, Ulrich is an unemployed thirty-two-year-old, who doesn't know what to do with himself. He is capable of great charm, but there is also something a little repulsive, even thuggish about him. He is "no respecter of rights unless he respects the person whose rights they are, which is not very often." In his school days, Ulrich's model was Napoleon, partly because of his "natural admiration for the criminal," partly because his teachers called Napoleon a tyrant. "Pas-

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sionate and detached at the same time," Ulrich "never needed that overhauling and lubrication that is called probing one's conscience."

Before the story of the novel begins, Ulrich had made three attempts to be a "great man," first through the cavalry, then in civil engineering, and finally in mathematics. He left the army after having been reprimanded for seducing an archduke's wife, quit engineering after concluding that engineers tend to "have that peculiar, stiff, remote, superficial manner that never goes deeper inside than the epiglottis," and was now settled on his own in mathematics, doing respectable but unrewarding work.

Ulrich gave up on greatness the day he happened to see a racehorse described as "a racehorse of genius." If a racehorse can be a "genius," what then? Concluding that "no matter what you do . . . it doesn't make the slightest difference," Ulrich decides "to take a year's leave of absence from his life in order to seek an appropriate application for his abilities." *The Man Without Qualities* is an account of that year's holiday from life.

Ulrich's basic sense of confusion is mirrored in his house, a small château that "had something blurred about it, like a double-exposed photograph." Faced with the prospect of redecorating it, he feels paralyzed by the infinite possibilities that yawn open before him. Free to choose any style "from the Assyrians to Cubism,"

> he was in that familiar state . . . of incoherent ideas spreading outward without a center, so characteristic of the present, and whose strange arithmetic adds up to a random proliferation of numbers without forming a unit. Finally he dreamed up only impracticable rooms, revolving rooms, kaleidoscopic rooms, adjustable scenery for the soul, and his ideas grew steadily more devoid of content.

Ulrich never really finds his vocation, but chance breaks in when his father helps arrange for him to become honorary secretary of a national campaign to celebrate the seventieth jubilee of the Emperor Franz Josef in 1918. Called the "Parallel Campaign" because of a similar celebration being planned in Germany, this was one of those phony endeavors whose aim is everything and nothing. Construed partly as a way of showing up the Germans (whose emperor would be celebrating merely his thirtieth jubilee), the Parallel Campaign was much more than a way of honoring Franz Josef. It was to be a celebration of Great Ideas—peace, patriotism, culture: a "spontaneous" outpouring of good will from the people that would be orchestrated down to the last detail. In short, the Parallel Campaign was the perfect repository for all manner of frustrated idealism, misguided beneficence, and outright charlatanry.

It was also the perfect repository for Musil's wicked sense of humor. Who could have foretold that Kakania—Musil's name for the Austro-Hungarian Empire—would disappear before those celebrations could take place? In 1913, everything was still so *gemütlich*.

> Of course cars rolled on these roads too, but not too many! The conquest of the air was being prepared here too, but not too intensively. A ship would now and then be sent off to South America or East Asia, but not too often. There was no ambition for world markets or world power. Here at the very center of Europe . . . words such as "colony" and "overseas" sounded like something quite untried and remote. There was some show of luxury, but by no means as in such overrefined ways as the French. People went in for sports, but not as fanatically as the English. Ruinous sums of money were spent on the army, but only just enough to secure its position as the second-weakest among the great powers.

And yet even in Kakania, something strange was happening:

> Men who once merely headed minor sects have become aged celebrities; publishers and art dealers have become rich; new movements are constantly being started; everybody attends both the academic and the avant-garde

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> shows, and even the avant-garde of the avant-garde; the family magazines have bobbed their hair; politicians like to sound off on the cultural arts, and newspapers make literary history. . . . Persons who would before never have been taken seriously became famous. Harshness mellowed, separations fused, intransigents made concessions to popularity, tastes already formed relapsed in uncertainties. Sharp boundaries everywhere became blurred and some new, indefinable ability to form alliances brought new people and new ideas to the top.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Throughout the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities*, the Parallel Campaign is the scaffolding upon which Musil hangs his tale and parades his motley cast of characters. There is the Jewish banker Leo Fischel and his daughter Gerda; she takes up with a band of Christian nationalists who "despised capitalism and maintained that no Jew had yet proved capable of serving as a great symbol of humanity. Leo Fischel called them anti-Semitic louts and would have forbidden them his house, but Gerda said, 'You don't understand, Papa, they only mean it symbolically.' " There are Ulrich's numerous inamoratas, for example the nymphomaniac he nicknamed Bonadea—"the good goddess"—who we see "stretched out on her back on the divan, her tender maternal belly in white batiste free to breathe unhampered by whalebone and laces. She called this position 'thinking.' "

And then there is Ulrich's cousin Ermelinda Tuzzi, a prime mover of the Parallel Campaign. Her real name is Hermine (like Musil's mother), but Ulrich nicknames her Diotima, after the high priestess of love in Plato's *Symposium*. The beautiful, unhappy wife of a high-ranking civil servant, Diotima was drawn to "Maeterlinck's batik-wrapped metaphysics," Novalis, and "most of all . . . the ineffable wave of anemic romanticism and yearning for God that, for a while, the machine age squirted out as an expression of its spiritual and artistic misgivings about itself." Her contribution to the Parallel Campaign included such assertions as "true Austria is the whole world" and "any feeling that isn't boundless is worthless."

One of Diotima's many admirers is Dr. Paul Arnheim, an immeasurably rich Prussian industrialist who is half-Jewish and speaks five languages. His chief ambition is to bring "ideas into the spheres of power," and he has written many books and pamphlets declaring the union of "soul and economics." Not that Arnheim is a narrow specialist; on the contrary, he also writes extensively on "algebraic series, benzol rings, the materialist as well as the universalist philosophy of history, bridge supports, the evolution of music, the essence of the automobile, Hata 606, the theory of relativity, Bohr's atomic theory, autogenous welding, the flora of the Himalayas, psychoanalysis . . . and all the other achievements that prevent a time so greatly enriched by them from turning out good, wholesome, integral human beings." It seemed to both Arnheim and Diotima that they had been fated by destiny to find true, if unfulfillable, love with each other; but then it turns out that Arnheim's chief interest in the Parallel Campaign had something to do with gaining control of the Galician oil fields.

There are three other characters that deserve to be mentioned. The first two are Ulrich's boyhood friend Walter, a failed pianist, and his young wife of three years, Clarisse, a chilly, neurotic, destructively unnurturing woman. Clarisse "had considered Walter a genius since she was fifteen, because she had always intended to marry only a genius. She would not let him fail her in this." As the daughter of a painter renowned for stage designs, Clarisse rebelled by growing up to hate "everything voluptuary in art." She refuses to sleep with Walter when he plays Wagner, taunting him with his artistic sterility. Walter is a different, more obvious sort of narcissist: "for him, the very act of moving his own arm was fraught with spiritual adventure, or else it

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was paralyzed in loving contemplation of itself." Walter is one of those people who was full of promise when young but who settled into cruel ordinariness as he got older. His solution to this problem—still a common solution among the terminally disappointed—is to blame his failure on the hopeless decadence of the age.

This tactic has many advantages. "Instead of *his* feeling bad and unable to work, it was now the times that were sick, while he was fine. His life, which had come to nothing, was now, all at once, tremendously accounted for, justified on a world-historical scale." No longer does Walter talk about "contemporary art" and "the art of the future," ideas that Clarrisse has associated with him since she was fifteen. Now, he

> would draw a line somewhere—in music stopping at, say, Bach, in literature at Stifter, in painting at Ingres—and explain that everything that came later was florid, degenerate, over-sophisticated and on the downward path. And he became increasingly violent in his assertion that in a time so poisoned at its spiritual roots as the present an artist of real integrity must abstain from creation altogether. But the treacherous thing was that although such austere opinions issued from his mouth, what issued from his room, as soon as he had locked himself in, was, more and more often, the sound of Wagner's music, that is to say, a kind of music that in earlier years he had taught Clarisse to despise as the perfect example of a philistine, florid, degenerate era, and to which he himself had now become addicted as to thickly brewed, hot, intoxicating poison.

Finally, some mention must be made of the carpenter Christian Moosbrugger: a huge, physically powerful man who is something of a simpleton. Moosbrugger has "a face blessed by God with every sign of goodness" but also just happens to be a crazed sex murderer whose trial for brutally slaughtering a prostitute forms one of the many leitmotifs of *The Man Without Qualities*. Whether Moosbrugger is mentally competent to stand trial is a question mooted throughout the book; since he tends to regard his acts as having "perched on him like birds that had flown in from somewhere or other," perhaps not. Although Musil never resolved Moosbrugger's fate, or his exact significance for the novel, it is clear that Moosbrugger represents the dark, unconscious viciousness and irrationalism pulsating underneath Kakania's rancid optimism. "If mankind could dream collectively [*als Ganzes*]," Ulrich reflects, "it would dream Moosbrugger." Ulrich flirts with trying to get Moosbrugger acquitted, and the increasingly deranged Clarisse becomes obsessed with him: "the murderer," she exclaims, "is musical!" In Moosbrugger, Clarisse envisions the eruption of a transforming violence that would sweep away the detritus of her frustrated, rudderless existence.

Musil has great fun playing these characters off one another. As V. S. Pritchett noted in an admiring 1962 essay on Musil, one of his great achievements is to have made such exotic characters humanly engaging. Another achievement, in the first volume, anyway, was to have woven his various "essayistic" themes so seamlessly into the novel. As already noted, one of the most important of these themes concerns the Nietzschean question of the value—the human, moral value—of scientific knowledge. Musil ridicules the Romanticism of characters like Diotima who condemn science for disenchanting the world with "facts." And yet he seems to side with Ulrich when he explains that "knowledge is a mode of conduct, a passion. At bottom, an impermissible mode of conduct: like dipsomania, sex mania, homicidal mania, the compulsion to know forms its own character that is off balance."

In one pivotal chapter, Musil reflects on the "peculiar predilection of scientific thinking for mechanical, statistical, and physical explanations that have, as it were, the heart cut out of them." This is the key passage:

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> The scientific mind sees kindness only as a special form of egotism; brings emotions into line with glandular secretions; notes that eight or nine tenths of a human being consists of water; explains our celebrated moral freedom as an automatic mental by-product of free trade; reduces beauty to good digestion and the proper distribution of fatty tissue; graphs the annual statistical curves of births and suicides to show that our most intimate personal decisions are programmed behavior; sees a connection between ecstasy and mental disease; equates the anus and the mouth as the rectal and the oral openings at either end of the same tube—such ideas, which expose the trick, as it were, behind the magic of human illusions, can always count on a kind of prejudice in their favor as being impeccably scientific.

Scientific rationality in this sense is not merely disillusioning; it is radically dehumanizing. It replaces the living texture of experience with a skeleton of "causes," "drives," "impulses," and the like. The enormous power over nature that science has brought man, Musil suggests, is only part of its attraction. Psychologically just as important is the power it gives one to dispense with the *human* claims of experience. How liberating to know that kindness is just another form of egotism! That beauty is merely a matter of fatty tissues being arranged properly! That every inflection of our emotional life is nothing but the entirely predictable result of glandular activity! *Just another*, *merely*, *nothing but* . . . How liberating, how dismissive are these instruments of dispensation—but how *un*true, finally, to our experience.

Musil presents scientific rationality as a *temptation* as well as an accomplishment because he sees that inherent in its view of the world is an invitation to forget one's humanity. It is this Promethean aspect of science that links it with evil. The feeling that "nothing in life can be relied on unless it is firmly nailed down," Musil writes, is "a basic feeling embedded in the sobriety of science; and though we are too respectable to call it the Devil, a slight whiff of brimstone still clings to it."

At the same time, however, Musil is never willing to side wholeheartedly with the Romantic attack on science. A bit earlier, he reminds his readers that

> One must not forget that basically the scientific cast of mind is more God-oriented than the aesthetic mind, ready to submit to "Him" the moment "He" deigns to show Himself under the conditions it prescribes for recognizing Him, while our aesthetes, confronted with His manifestation, would find only that His talent was not original and that His view of the world was not sufficiently intelligible to rank Him with really God-given talents.

Musil's reflections on the moral significance of scientific rationality are exceptionally subtle and illuminating. Especially impressive is the way that he weaves these reflections into his narrative, adjusting their resonance and implication to each character, and, finally, showing how the passion for reason was powerless to save Kakania from the great irrationality that was poised to engulf it.

Volume one concludes after Ulrich's proposal to establish a General Secretariat for Precision and Soul is (not surprisingly) rebuffed by the organizers of the Parallel Campaign. The machinations of the Campaign now begin to recede and the story of Ulrich and his sister, Agathe, comes to the fore. (Like many of the important female characters, Agathe's name is of some significance: it comes from the Greek word *agathos*, "the good," i.e., that to which we all aspire.) Brought together after many years' separation by the death of their father, the siblings rediscover each other. The mood of the book now changes substantially: gone is the bright, satirical tone of the first volume. This may have been partly due to darkening elements in Musil's life. Since at least the mid-Twenties, Musil's financial condition had been precarious; increasingly, his psychological condition followed suit. In 1929, the year before the first volume of *The Man*

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Without Qualities appeared, he suffered a nervous breakdown. Friends started a Musil Society to help support the novelist, but he was never really to know financial security again for the rest of his life. In 1933, he and Martha left Germany for Vienna when Hitler came to power; in 1938, they left for Switzerland after the Anschluss delivered Austria into Hitler's hands. In the meantime, in 1936, Musil suffered a stroke, but was able to work again before long.

The later portions of *The Man Without Qualities* have their admirers. But for many they will be slow going. The long conversations between Ulrich and Agathe, and the detailed ruminations on various religious texts, are dramatically static. There are many enlivening episodes and aperçus as the pages accumulate, but accumulate they do; the novel never really recovers its momentum. This is a pity, for Musil clearly invested a great deal in the story of Ulrich and Agathe; there is even some evidence that he regarded the story of their relationship as the centerpiece of the book: when he began working on the novel, in the mid-Twenties, his working title was "The Twin Sister." It is daunting to think of the thousand pages of the first volume of *The Man Without Qualities* as prolegomenon, but there you are. Unfortunately, this is a case in which aspiration did not match achievement. As Musil himself acknowledged in a note, "Volume One closes approximately at the high point of an arch; on the other side it has no support."

It has often been pointed out that, at bottom, Musil was a kind of moralist. Like Rilke, his favorite poet, he wanted his work to communicate the imperative "Du mußt dein leben ändern" ("You must change your life"). He hoped that the relationship between Ulrich and Agathe would furnish a model for that imperative. It is here that Musil's investment in Nietzsche betrays him. The title of the second volume of *The Man Without Qualities* is "Into the Millennium (The Criminals)." The criminals in question were Ulrich and Agathe. Their crime, in the first instance, was to shatter, or attempt to shatter, the traditional bourgeois moral code. Musil signals this by hinting at an incestuous union between them. He hoped that by placing the siblings "beyond good and evil" he could picture a form of life that transcended the many human and cultural deficiencies he had anatomized in the first volume. Musil's term for this state of transcendence was *der andere Zustand*, "the other condition," a species of aestheticized religious experience that Musil summarized in one essay as "the condition of love, of goodness, of renunciation of the world, of contemplation, of vision, of approach to God, of entrancement, of willlessness, of meditation," etc. One might dismiss such experiences, he wrote, did they not leave traces everywhere and did they "not constitute the marrow of our morality and idealism."

> One finds again and again the presence of another world, like a solid ocean bottom from which the restless waves of the ordinary world have drawn back; and in the image of this world there is neither measure nor precision, neither purpose nor cause: good and evil simply fall away.

Musil's evocation of "the other condition" is attractively poetic; but it does not offer the existential transformation he seeks. As one commentator on *The Man Without Qualities* noted, in the relationship between Agathe and Ulrich there is "the repeated implication . . . that there might be a way to have a permanent vacation *in* reality." But reality will always reassert itself, and with reality come all the moral strictures *this side* of good and evil. At one point, Ulrich confides, "I believe that all our moral injunctions are concessions to a society of savages." In fact, it is only by heeding our moral injunctions that we may be preserved from savagery. Scholars conjecture that the last words Musil wrote the morning he died were those in which Ulrich acknowledges that he and Agathe were "nihilists and activists," not realists. Perhaps Musil was coming around to that realization as well.

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Vermeer in Washington

by Karen Wilkin

The International Art Critics' Association, an organization most valuable for its widely accepted press pass, annually asks its members to choose the past year's best exhibitions. Nineteen ninety-five had many contenders in the category of "painting or sculpture exhibit in a museum": the retrospectives of Cézanne, Mondrian, Brancusi, and Monet, in this country and in Europe, for starters; Goya at the Met or the Anthony Caro retrospective at the new Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. For sheer rarity, however, there is only one choice: the Johannes Vermeer exhibition jointly organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague. [1] Astonishingly enough, this is the first show ever dedicated exclusively to the acclaimed Dutch master. In a triumph of curatorial diplomacy, this small but comprehensive exhibition assembles almost two thirds of the authentic paintings by the artist still extant, from all periods of his twenty-year career, many of them on loan for the first time.

I missed the press preview of the Vermeer show in Washington, and because of an unhappy meshing of my travel committments and the museum closings caused by the budget wars, I didn't get there until that strange week between Christmas and New Year's when private funding came briefly to the rescue of frustrated ticket holders. The crowds were staggering. When the museum opened at 10:00 A.M., lines to enter already stretched almost half the length of the building. (The National Gallery's beleaguered press officer told me that people had been waiting since 6:00 A.M., and I admit to feeling only slight guilt and enormous relief that I hadn't had to do that.) It was hardly the ideal way to see small-scale, contemplative pictures, but the crowding mattered less than I feared. The galleries were packed, but strangely quiet. The overwhelming majority were single-mindedly focused on the pictures. Having made enormous efforts to see the show, they were determined to absorb as much as they could.

In a curious way, the presence of the attentive hordes was less distruptive than stimulating. It was not unpleasant to be part of a mass effort at serious concentration, and some of the comments that occasionally broke the respectful silence raised questions —about how Vermeer's art is perceived and why it is perceived that way—that might

1 "Johannes Vermeer" opened at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, on November 12, 1995, and remains on view through February 11, 1996. The show will reopen at the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, The Hague, on March 1, 1996 and remain on view through June 2. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., Albert Blankert, Ben Broos, and Jørgen Wadumhas, has been published by the National Gallery of Art and the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis (229 pages, $45; $19.95 paper).

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not have seemed so urgent in a more tranquil, unpopulated setting.

Why were there so many visitors? I hadn't thought Vermeer, for all the poetic charm of his pictures, had that wide an audience. Obviously, I was wrong. Yet Dutch seventeenth-century painters, except for Rembrandt, are generally less familiar, less instantly synonymous with the excellences of high art than, say, the painters of the Italian Renaissance, and Vermeer is a relatively arcane figure. His reputation rests on a mere thirty-five surviving works, in a small number of collections. His history is largely an enigma. Among the few certainties are his birth in Delft in 1632, his death there in 1675, and his marriage, in 1653, to Catharina Bolnes, a Catholic in Protestant Holland. At the end of that same year, Vermeer registered as a master painter, a member of the artists' guild of Saint Luke.

Nothing is known about his formation, his contacts with other artists, his travels—if there were any—although it is believed that Rembrandt's phenomenally gifted pupil, Carel Fabritius, was an important influence. Tragically killed, at thirty-two, in a powder explosion in Delft, Fabritius was a painter of stunning originality whose economical, dispassionate works at once repudiate his teacher Rembrandt's brushy intensity and anticipate Vermeer's apparently unemotional, magically stilled genre scenes. (His best known work is probably that marvelous little picture of a songbird on a perch, against a tawny plaster wall, in the Mauritshuis.) But Fabritius's oeuvre is so small, so few of Vermeer's works have survived, and the existing indisputable documentation is so sparse, that even specialists are left in the realm of speculation.

That Vermeer was highly regarded in his lifetime is fairly clear. He was chosen more than once to head the Guild of Saint Luke, evidence of the respect of his colleagues, and contemporary connoisseurs called him "excellent" and "famous," although one disgruntled French collector described his works as "over-priced." Vermeer apparently lived quietly and enjoyed success as a painter, a dealer, and an appraiser of works of art—at least until the last years of his life, when war with France more or less destroyed Holland's economy and, with it, the market for pictures. In the period immediately following his death, Vermeer's paintings were admired and collected, mostly by his fellow countrymen, but for the next century or so, he was largely forgotten, his works frequently attributed to those of his contemporaries and colleagues who had remained in fashion. Not until the mid-nineteenth century was Vermeer "rediscovered" and discussed with perception and enthusiasm by the French critic Thoré-Bürger. (Proust alludes to this in the first volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*: that Swann is at work on a study of Vermeer, at the time of his initial obsession with Odette de Crecy, marks him as a sophisticated connoisseur of the obscure and the beautiful and makes his association with the pretentious, slightly vulgar worshippers of modernity who are Odette's friends all the more unlikely.)

Despite Vermeer's present-day position of eminence, the years of neglect and confusion about his authorship are not wholly surprising. In subject, his pictures *are* inseparable from those of his fellow genre painters. Except for a few early experiments with religious and mythological themes and a couple of urban landscapes, Vermeer concentrated, like many of his colleagues, on domestic interiors, scenes of ordinary life, presented most often with bourgeois correctness, occasionally with racy undertones, and sometimes with subtle layers of serious visual punning. What separates Vermeer from Metsu, ter Borch, de Hooch, Steen, and all the rest of the period's other recorders of middle-class domesticity, is the perfect equilibrium of composition, color, and tone he manages in his pictures. No other seventeenth-century Dutch painter achieves, so consistently and apparently so effortlessly, such astonishing lucidity and firmness of structure; no other displays such an unfailing sense of tonality and light. Ver-

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meer's subjects may be rooted in everyday experience, but he transforms the quotidian into immaculate paradigms of stability and solemnity. His paintings embody discretion, *gravitas*, and reticence—an unlikely recipe for popularity these days, when audiences seem most responsive to high-impact art that demands little effort on the part of the viewer. Nor does Vermeer's obscure, uneventful history suggest that he would fascinate a public that mythologizes the alienated, bad-boy artist.

Yet there were unprecedented crowds at the National Gallery, who, remarkably enough, were looking hard at the exhibited works. They hadn't come just because the show was difficult to get into—not if it meant waiting outdoors, on a winter morning, before dawn. They may not even have come because of the unheard-of opportunity to see the majority of the world's extant Vermeers in one place. To judge by their rapt attention, they were wholly engaged by individual works. It would be pleasant to think that this was a triumph of aesthetic excellence, but the pictures seemed to fascinate for other than aesthetic reasons. To judge by many of the visitors' comments, they believed intensely in the reality of what they were seeing. In front of the Rijksmuseum's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (1663–64), two couples debated whether the news in the letter was bad or good, searching the expression on the painted, fictive face, as though the picture were a photograph of an actual event. The miraculous *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665–66, Mauritshuis) elicited speculation about the artist's relationship to the young woman who posed for the painting, in which the girl seems to have just caught sight of the viewer over her shoulder, the beginning of a smile flickering on her moist, parted lips.

The uncanny stillness, the apparent timelessness of Vermeer's images notwithstanding, people were caught up in some implied narrative. Yet that narrative was certainly of their own making. Vermeer's main subjects are moments without significance—reading or writing a letter, adjusting a necklace, gazing out a window—snatched from the continuum of time and endlessly prolonged, like a single, pure, true note held far beyond the limits of reason. Of course, it's not quite that simple. As the catalogue reminds us, some of these apparently benign, carefully adjusted nondramas are elaborate emblems of particular virtues; an image of a woman holding a balance, in front of a painting of the Last Judgement, beside a table piled with jewelry, is probably an admonition to live a life of moderation. In the same way, seemingly casual encounters between men and women—scenes of music-making or of sharing glasses of wine—may allude to distinctly nondomestic sexual relationships. It's like an updated version of the disguised religious symbolism of Northern Renaissance painting, the charming views out the window into walled gardens that are really references to the virginity of Mary, and the like.

Whatever the subtext, more often than not, Vermeer's figures are wholly absorbed by what they are doing. They are introspective, oblivious, so self-absorbed and so embedded in the architecture of the picture that they have been compared to still-life objects. Occasionally, they glance at one another. (Then the exchange of gazes often defines yet another geometric axis in the composition.) Rarely, startlingly, they look at the spectator. In the best Vermeers, such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, this awareness seems momentary, as though the painted figure could instantly withdraw acknowledgement of the beholder and return to her self-sufficient, closed world. When Vermeer does not achieve this sense of immediacy, as often happens in his late works, his pictures suffer. Two paintings of the 1670s in the show, both of young women at the virginal, are atypically staged and rigid, in part because their subjects gaze fixedly at the spectator. The animating sense of transience is missing; all that remains is an endless "now," devoid of the suggestive promise of

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past and future that lends mystery to Vermeer's best paintings.

At the National Gallery, it was plain that this quality of allusive stillness fascinated Vermeer's audience. Their comments reflected their urgent desire to know what had happened just before the seemingly inconsequential moment depicted, and what was going to happen afterwards. Their admiring scrutiny of the paintings seemed less a quest for understanding just what Vermeer had done—how he had disposed elements, distributed colors, organized space, or articulated forms—than it did a search for explanation of what was going on. The only works that didn't elicit this kind of response were the three early pictures in the first room, with their large-scale figures—for Vermeer—their broad modelling, and generous structure. Most visitors read the text panels carefully, glanced at the paintings and hurried on, looking for the enigmatic domestic narratives they seemed to expect of the artist. For some, of course, these religious and mythological pictures of the mid-1650s offered tantalizing evidence of Vermeer's early influences. Clearly, the soft-edged masses, the dusty, form-revealing light, the ambiguous settings, all owed an enormous debt to Italian precedents. Did Vermeer know Italian pictures firsthand or did he rely on the Dutch Caravaggisti of the previous generation as intermediaries? One of the few facts known about Vermeer's life is that he was summoned to The Hague in 1672 to give an expert opinion on some Italian paintings, but this was only three years before his death and tells us nothing about his early encounters.

In a sense, the impatient visitors were right. Once you were confronted by "typical" Vermeers, even these absorbing art historical questions mattered very little. Before he was thirty, Vermeer had defined his own territory, within the conventions of genre painting of the second half of the seventeenth century: small-scale, pellucid views of a world at once austere and comfortable, where nothing important seems to happen, translated into firm geometry, rendered in deliberate strokes of exquisitely modulated paint. Vermeer's circumscribed universe is so convincing and, by the third or fourth picture, so familiar, that anything outside the confines of his cool, tile-floored rooms seems utterly irrelevant. Well, anything except *The Little Street* (c. 1657–1658, Rijksmuseum) and *View of Delft* (c. 1660–1661, Mauritshuis), which served, in the context of the show, to establish the outer limits of Vermeer's field of vision. They read simultaneously as accurate records and idealized inventions. The places from which Vermeer distilled his images were probably not as pristine, as orderly, or as *rational* as he depicted them, but we read them nevertheless as archetypical images of Holland as we wish it to be, all rosy brick, spotless paving, and limpid skies full of picturesque clouds.

Enchanting as the outdoor pictures are, the images that imprint themselves most insistently are the interiors. You feel as though you know every corner of that modest room with a window on the left, its plaster walls punctuated with a row of blue and white tiles at baseboard level; you recognize the chunky armless chairs—brown (leather?) ones and blue ones—with their rows of brass-headed nails and lion's head finials, the map on the wall, the patterned tile floor. You come to recognize, too, particular garments (a sumptuous yellow jacket with a fur lining, a yellow and blue dress) and particular objects (a white pitcher, a Turkish carpet). Yet the more familiar with Vermeer's visual vocabulary you become, the more unreal his pictures seem. Their artifice becomes increasingly apparent, until they reveal themselves fully as complex inventions, like toy stage sets on which detached narratives are enacted by costumed players. You willingly transpose yourself into this world, imagining yourself small enough to enter into these intimate, magically miniaturized rooms. At the same time, you acknowledge that for all their seeming realism, these "snapshots" of seventeenth-century Dutch life are the products of the

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painter's will, their seductive calm and resonant silence the results of his masterly adjustment of colors, his unerring balancing of shapes and forms.

Every element of a Vermeer interior is pulled into a clear relationship with both the axes of the canvas and its invisible surface plane. Like his twentieth-century compatriot Mondrian, Vermeer filters the world around him through a kind of ideal Platonic form, measuring and aligning almost everything in his paintings against absolute verticality and absolute horizonality. The intervals between elements are no less carefully controlled, no less eloquent than the figures and furniture themselves. Within this rarefied geometry, the curve of a skirt, the diagonal of an arm, the swell of a cheek become momentous. Color, too, is harmonized, delicately pulled toward one end of the spectrum or the other and then—brilliantly—made reverberant by a surprising unexpected contrast or shift.

In the Rijksmuseum's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, for example, the coloristic range is set by the light blue silk jacket, echoed by blue chairs, a blue-black rug on the table, and a cold plaster wall lit by an unseen window; but the figure is framed and projected forward by the warm ochre behind her and the light-filled shadows. It's very appealing, like the chalky blues and yellows of the Metropolitan's little masterpiece, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (c. 1664–1665). What saves both pictures from being merely tasteful are unexpected hues, unexpectedly placed. In *Woman in Blue*, the cool lavender-brown rectangular mass of the figure's skirt is made equivalent to the warm, golden map behind her, shifting both the limits of Vermeer's palette and the space of the painting. In the Met's picture, a complex interweaving of dark blue and dull yellow masses is offset by a note of orange-red, the inside of a box, that threatens—beneficially—to destabilize the rock-solid underpinnings of the painting.

What makes these elegantly constructed pictures so immediate? What inspires the apparent belief in the absolute truth of what is depicted so evident in the viewers' comments? Not meticulous finish or "photographic" illusionism. Quite the contrary. People peered closely at paintings and said, plaintively, "It's not as detailed as I thought." It isn't. Vermeer's touch, while delicate, is often surprisingly broad and free, almost casual in its virtuosity—think of those rapidly flecked highlights, like motes of dust made visible in a shaft of sunlight, or the staccato, stabbing brushstrokes that conjure up the thick, woolly pile of a Turkish rug. He creates convincing pictorial equivalents for our perceptions, not by painting what he knows is there, but by suggesting only what he can see, in a kind of (lower-case) impressionism.

I suspect that this preoccupation with perceptual (as opposed to conceptual) accuracy is what led Vermeer to exploit the possibilities of the *camera obscura* as an aid to rendering space, rather than relying solely on the codified formulae of one-point perspective. Small wonder that the (upper-case) Impressionists admired him, a new discovery in the 1860s, when these aspiring young realists first hit their collective stride. What Vermeer painted—his vernacular subject matter and his evocation of daylight—must have impressed them, but how he painted it was suggestive. The floating dots of color that make his pictures sparkle and resolve themselves into optical truth, when viewed from the proper distance, anticipate Monet's notion of achieving realism by painting the colored shapes that the eye sees, without striving to identify what those shapes are attached to.

Vermeer's assured, direct approach may help to make his work accessible to twentieth-century eyes, but what really convinces you of the truthfulness of his hermetic interiors is his evocation of light, through his astounding ability to orchestrate tones and modulate hues. Even without the clues offered by the clothes worn by the figures in his paintings, there's no mistaking the season or time of day in Vermeer's fictive worlds. A silvery gray palette, with pearly

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overtones and spreading pools of shadow, signals fall or winter in the National Gallery's *Woman Holding a Balance* (c. 1664) and *A Lady Writing* (c. 1665), as does the pale sunlight of the Berlin Staatliche Museum's *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1664); the fur-edged jackets simply confirm the evidence of the tones. Even in the "warm" pictures, like the spectacular *Geographer*, (c. 1668–1669, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main), the tonalities are definitely Northern; golden, slanting light evokes the endless twilights of the Northern summer. (*The Geographer* was one of the stars of the show; a rare male portrait, very possibly of the scientist Anthony van Leeuwenhoek, inventor of the microscope, the picture is notable for suggesting the alert activity of its subject simply by subtly disposed diagonals, a forward curve of the body, and a mountain range of broadly articulated folds in the Turkish rug piled on a table in the foreground.)

Convincing as Vermeer's tonal and coloristic equivalents of daylight may be, longer acquaintance makes the fundamental artifice of his paintings clearer. The shapes assumed by zones of light and shadow are as carefully calculated, as trued and faired, as his arrangements of furniture and architectural elements. Light plays its part, too, in the creation of an ideal, idealized, geometrically pure world. You are reminded of the important symbolic role of light in the paintings of Vermeer's Renaissance predecessors, the jewel-like, meticulous altarpieces by van der Weyden, Bouts, and the van Eycks in which the passage of rays of sunshine through a windowpane becomes a potent metaphor for the Immaculate Conception. Did Vermeer intend this? Probably not, but the association, however tenuous, is more evidence of the richness and complexity of his deceptively straightforward pictures.

The splendid show at the National Gallery has been described, quite accurately, as a once in a lifetime event. One exhilarated critic amended this to "once in three lifetimes," a calculation that seems modest, since more than three centuries elapsed, after Vermeer's death, before anyone organized such a show. Given the riches that have been assembled, it seems churlish to complain about omissions, but the absence of the Frick's superb "conversation" pictures, no doubt for excellent reasons, placed undue weight on the single-figure images. Even more conspicuous was the lack of the paradigmatic *Art of Painting* (c. 1666–1667, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the enigmatic tableau in which you peer over the shoulder of an elegantly dressed artist at work on an allegorical motif, and beyond him, at his frankly posed model, with her drapes and props, all set within that familiar room with its map, its nail-studded chairs, its window on the left. The Metropolitan's later, somewhat similar *Allegory of Faith* (1671–1674), which was in the show, while iconographically intriguing, is—like most of Vermeer's last pictures—stiffer and less ambiguous than the Vienna masterpiece. (Some of the missing masterworks from the Rijksmuseum will join the exhibition in The Hague.)

In compensation, the exhibition's excellent catalogue reproduces, in color, most of Vermeer's pictures, unfortunately, with the usual distortions of scale and color inherent in any illustrations. The catalogue essays and entries are fascinating summaries of current and past Vermeer scholarship. The catalogue pieces together what is known of Vermeer's personal history, sets him and his work in the context of his peers, dissects his technique, traces the history of individual paintings and of the artist's reputation, and offers alternative readings of various pictures. Among the absorbing topics addressed are Vermeer's modernity (in seventeenth-century terms), his dedication to youth, and the role of drink in his narratives, all in eminently straightforward prose. The catalogue is essential reading for any visitor to the Vermeer show. I'd also recommend visiting the Frick and the Metropolitan, as a footnote, to see the pictures that didn't travel to Washington, both to fill in the gaps and for the sheer pleasure.

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The Hunter Gracchus

by Guy Davenport

On April 6, 1917, in a dwarfishly small house rented by his sister Ottla in the medieval quarter of Prague (22 Alchymistengasse—Alchemists' Alley), Kafka wrote in his diary:

> Today, in the tiny harbor where save for fishing boats only two ocean-going passenger steamers used to call, a strange boat lay at anchor. A clumsy old craft, rather low and very broad, filthy, as if bilge water had been poured over it, it still seemed to be dripping down the yellowish sides; the masts disproportionately tall, the upper third of the mainmast split; wrinkled, coarse, yellowish-brown sails stretched every which way between the yards, patched, too weak to stand against the slightest gust of wind.
>
> I gazed in astonishment at it for a time, waited for someone to show himself on deck; no one appeared. A workman sat down beside me on the harbor wall. "Whose ship is that?" I asked; "this is the first time I've seen it."
>
> "It puts in every two or three years," the man said, "and belongs to the Hunter Gracchus."

Gracchus, the name of a noble Roman family from the third to the first centuries B.C., is synonymous with Roman virtue at its sternest. It is useful to Kafka not only for its antiquity and tone of incorruptible rectitude (a portrait bust, as may be, on a classroom shelf, at odds and yet in harmony with the periodic table of the elements behind it), but also for its meaning, a grackle or blackbird; in Czech, a *kavka*. Kafka's father had a blackbird on his business letterhead.

The description of Gracchus's old ship is remarkably like Melville's of the *Pequod*, whose "venerable bows looked bearded" and whose "ancient decks were worn and wrinkled." From Noah's ark to Jonah's storm-tossed boat out of Joppa to the Roman ships in which St. Paul sailed perilously, the ship in history has always been a sign of fate itself.

The first Hunter Gracchus

A first draft, or fragment, of "The Hunter Gracchus" (the title of both fragment and story are Max Brod's) is a dialogue between Gracchus and a visitor to the boat. Gracchus imagines himself known and important. His fate is special and unique. The dialogue is one of cross-purposes. Gracchus says that he is "the most ancient of seafarers," patron saint of sailors. He offers wine. "The master does me proud." Who the master is (Gracchus doesn't understand his language) is a mystery. He died, in fact, "today" in Hamburg, while Gracchus is "down south here." The effect of this fragment is of an Ancient Mariner trying to tell his story to and impress his importance upon a reluctant listener, who concludes that life is too short to hear this old bore

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out. In the achieved story the interlocutor is the mayor of Riva, who must be diplomatically attentive. The authority of myth engages with the authority of skeptical reason, so that when the mayor asks, "Sind Sie tot?," the metaphysical locale shivers like the confused needle of a compass in "Ja, sagte der Jäger, wie Sie sehen."

A Victorian pentimento

Between writing the two texts now known as "The Hunter Gracchus: A Fragment" and "The Hunter Gracchus," Kafka read Wilkie Collins's novel *Armadale*, which ran serially in *The Cornhill Magazine* from 1864 to 1866, when it was published with great success and popularity. A German translation by Marie Scott (Leipzig, 1866) went through three editions before 1878.

Along with *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), *Armadale* is one of the three masterpieces of intricately plotted novels of melodrama, suspense, and detection that made Collins as famous as, and for a while, more famous than Dickens.

Although its plot contains a ship that has taken a wrong course, and turns up later as a ghostly wreck, a sudden impulse that dictates the fate of two innocent people (both named Allen Armadale), it is the novel's opening scene that Kafka found interesting enough to appropriate and transmute. Collins furnished Kafka with an ominous arrival of an invalid on a stretcher, with a ghastly face and matted hair, who is carried past the everyday street life of a village—including "flying detachments of plump white-headed children" and a mother with a child at her breast—to be met by the mayor.

Collins's scene is set at a spa in the Black Forest (home of the Hunter Gracchus in the "Fragment"). He has a band playing the waltz from Weber's *Der Freischütz*, which must have struck Kafka as a serendipitous correspondence. Among the archetypes of the Hunter Gracchus is the enchanted marksman of that opera. In Collins it is a guilty past that cannot be buried. The dead past persists. Kafka makes a crystalline abstract of Collins's plot, concentrating its essence into the figure of Gracchus, his wandering ship, his fate, and the enigmatic sense that the dead, having lived and acted, are alive.

Collins's elderly, dying invalid is a murderer. He has come to the spa at Wildbad with a young wife and child. In the last moments he must write a confession intended to avert retribution for his crime from being passed on to his son. *Armadale* is the working out of the futility of that hope.

Kafka, having written a dialogue between Gracchus and an unidentified interlocutor, found in Collins a staging. Gracchus must have an arrival, a procession to a room, an interlocutor with an identity, and a more focussed role as man-the-wanderer, fated by an inexplicable past in which a wrong turn was taken that can never be corrected.

De Chirico

The first paragraph of "The Hunter Gracchus" displays the quiet, melancholy stillness of Italian *piazze* that Nietzsche admired, leading Giorgio de Chirico to translate Nietzche's feeling for Italian light, architecture, and street life into those paintings which art history calls metaphysical. The enigmatic tone of de Chirico comes as much from Arnold Böcklin (whose "Isle of the Dead" is further down the lake from Riva).[1] Böcklin's romanticism of mystery, of dark funereal beauty, is in the idiom of the Décadence, "the moment of Nietzsche." Kafka, like de Chirico, was aware of and influenced by this *Stimmung* of a new melancholy that informed European art and writing from Scandinavia to Rome, from London to Prague.

Kafka's distinction is that he stripped it of those elements which would quickly soften into Kitsch.

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1 For *nicceismo* in Böcklin and de Chirico, see Alberto Savinio's "Arnold Böcklin" in *Operatic Lives* and de Chirico's *Memoirs*. Savinio is de Chirico's brother.

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"Zwei Knaben saßen auf der Quaimauer und spielen Würfel." Two boys were sitting on the harbor wall playing with dice. They touch, lightly, the theme of hazard, of chance, that will vibrate throughout. "History is a child playing at knucklebones," said Heraclitus two and a half millennia earlier, "and that child is the whole majesty of man's power in the world." Mallarmé's "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," with its imagery of shipwreck and pathless seas, was published when Kafka was fourteen, in 1897. "God does not play at dice," said Einstein (whom Kafka may have met at a Prague salon they are both known to have attended). Kafka was not certain that He didn't.

There is a monument on this quay, a "säbelschwingende Held," a sword-flourishing hero, in whose shadow a man is reading a newspaper. History in two *tempi*, and Kafka made the statue up, much as he placed a sword-bearing Statue of Liberty in *Amerika*.

A girl is filling her jug at the public fountain. (Joyce, having a Gemini in the boys, an Aquarius in the water jug, and a Sagittarius in the monument, would have gone ahead and tucked in a full zodiac, however furtively; signs and symbols have no claim on Kafka, who wrecks tradition rather than trust any part of it.)

A fruitseller lies beside his scales (more zodiac, Libra!) staring out to sea.

Then a fleeting Cézanne: through the door and windows of the café we can see two men drinking wine at a table "in der Tiefe," all the way at the back. The owner is out front, asleep at one of his own tables.

Into this de Chirico high noon comes a ship, "eine Barke," "silently making for the little harbor." The sailor who secures the boat with a rope through a ring wears a blue blouse, a French touch that makes us note that two French words have already turned up (*quai* and *barque*). It's the late, hard, spare style of Flaubert, as in the opening paragraphs of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, that Kafka is taking for a model, and improving upon.

Gracchus, like Wilkie Collins's Armadale, is brought across the quay on a bier, covered by a large Victorian shawl, "a great flower-patterned tasselled silk cloth" perhaps taken from Collins's carpet speckled with "flowers in all the colours of the rainbow," and like Armadale, he seems to be more dead than alive.

Gracchus's arrival is strangely ignored by the people in the square, as if he were invisible. A new set of characters—a committee of innocents—take over: a mother with a nursing child, a little boy who opens and closes a window, and a flock of biblical doves, whose associations with fated ships fit Kafka's diction of imagery, Noah's dove from the ark, and Jonah's name ("dove" in Hebrew).

The mayor of Riva arrives as soon as Gracchus has been carried inside a yellow house with an oaken door. He is dressed in black, with a funeral band on his top hat.

Fifty little boys

These "fünfzig kleine Knaben" who line up in two rows and bow to the Bürgermeister of Riva when he arrives at the house where the Hunter Gracchus has been carried remind us of Max Ernst's *collages*, or Delvaux's paintings; that is, they enact the surrealist strategy of being from the dream world, like Kipling's hovering ghost children in "They" or Tchelitchev's children in *Cache-cache*.

Another horde of children, girls this time, crowd the stairs to the court painter Titorelli's studio in *The Trial*. Their presence is almost as inexplicable as that of the boys. They live in the mazelike tenement where Titorelli paints judges and brokers gossip about cases in process. They are silly, provocative, brazen pests. Like the boys, they line up on either side of the stairway, "squeezing against the walls to leave room for K. to pass." They form, like the boys, a kind of gauntlet through which the mayor of Riva and K. have to pass to a strange and unsettling encounter.

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In December 1911 Kafka, having witnessed the circumcision of a nephew, noted that in Russia the period between birth and circumcision was thought to be particularly vulnerable to devils for both the mother and the son. "For seven days after the birth, except on Friday, also in order to ward off evil spirits, ten to fifteen children, always different ones, led by the *belfer* [assistant teacher], are admitted to the bedside of the mother, there repeat *Shema Israel*, and are then given candy. These innocent, five- to eight-year-old children are supposed to be especially effective in driving back the evil spirits, who press forward most strongly toward evening."

At the beginning of *Armadale*, the Bürgermeister of Wildbad in the Black Forest, awaiting the arrival of the elder Armadale ("who lay helpless on a mattress supported by a stretcher; his hair long and disordered under a black skull-cap; his eyes wide open, rolling to and fro ceaselessly anxious; the rest of his face as void of all expression . . . as if he had been dead"), is surrounded by "flying detachments of plump white-headed children careered in perpetual motion."

In 1917 Kafka wrote in his journal: "They were given the choice of becoming kings or the king's messengers. As is the way with children, they all wanted to be messengers. That is why there are only messengers, racing through the world and, since there are no kings, calling out to each other the messages that have now become meaningless." (There is another sentence—"They would gladly put an end to their miserable life, but they do not dare to do so because of their oath of loyalty"—that starts another thought superfluous to the perfect image of messenger children making a botch of all messages.)

All messages in Kafka are incoherent, misleading, enigmatic. The most irresponsible and childish messengers are the assistants to K. in *The Castle*. (They probably enter Kafka's imagination as two silent Swedish boys Kafka kept seeing at a nudist spa in Austria in 1912, always together, uncommunicative, politely nodding in passing, traversing Kafka's path with comic regularity.)

The new myth

Despite Kafka's counting on myths and folktales about hunters, enchanted ships, the Wandering Jew, ships for the souls of the dead, and all the other cultural furniture to stir in the back of our minds as we read "The Hunter Gracchus," he does not, like Joyce, specify them. He treats them like ground water which his taproot can reach. Even when he selects something from the midden of myth, he estranges it. His Don Quijote, his Tower of Babel, his Bucephalus are transmutations.

Hermann Broch in his introduction to Rachel Bespaloff's *De l'Iliade* (1943, English translation as *On the Iliad*, 1947) placed Kafka's relation to myth accurately, beyond it as an exhausted resource. Broch's was one of the earliest sensibilities to see Joyce's greatness and uniqueness. His art, however, was an end and a culmination. Broch's own *The Death of Virgil* may be the final elegy closing the long duration of a European literature from Homer to Joyce. In Kafka he saw a new beginning, a fiercely bright sun burning through the opaque mists of a dawn.

> The striking relationship between the arts on the basis of their common abstractism [Broch wrote], their common style of old age, this hallmark of our epoch is the cause of the inner relationship between artists like Picasso, Stravinsky, and Joyce. This relationship is not only striking in itself but also by reason of the parallelism through which the style of old age was imposed on these men, even in their rather early years.
>
> Nevertheless, abstractism forms no *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the ideal of the late romantic; the arts remain separate. Literature especially can never become completely abstract and "musicalized": therefore the style of old age relies here much more on another symptomatic attitude, namely on the trend toward

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> myth. It is highly significant that Joyce goes back to the *Odyssey*. And although this return to myth—already anticipated in Wagner—is nowhere so elaborated as in Joyce's work, it is for all that a general attitude of modern literature, as, for instance, in the novels of Thomas Mann, is an evidence of the impetuosity with which myth surges to the forefront of poetry. However, this is only a return—a return to myth in its ancient forms (even when they are so modernized as in Joyce), and so far it is not a new myth, not *the* new myth. Yet, we may assume that at least the first realization of such a new myth is already evident, namely in Franz Kafka's writing.
>
> In Joyce one may still detect neo-romantic trends, a concern with the complications of the human soul, which derives directly from nineteenth-century literature, from Stendhal, and even from Ibsen. Nothing of this kind can be said about Kafka. Here the personal problem no longer exists, and what seems still personal is, at the very moment it is uttered, dissolved in a super-personal atmosphere. The prophecy of myth is suddenly at hand.

Prophecy. All of Kafka is about history that had not yet happened. His sister Ottla would die in the camps, along with all of his kin. *Ungeziefer*, the word for *insect* that Kafka used for Gregor Samsa, is the same word the Nazis used for Jews, and *insect extermination* was one of their obscene euphemisms, as George Steiner has pointed out.

Quite soon after the Second World War it was evident that in *The Castle* and *The Trial*, and especially "In the Penal Colony," Kafka was accurately describing the mechanics of totalitarian barbarity.

Perpetual oscillation

Kafka, Broch says in the Bespaloff introduction, had "reached the point of the Either-Or: either poetry is able to proceed to myth, or it goes bankrupt."

> Kafka, in his presentiment of the new cosmogony, the new theogony that he had to achieve, struggling with his love of literature, his disgust for literature, feeling the ultimate insufficiency of any artistic approach, decided (as did Tolstoy, faced with a similar decision) to quit the realm of literature, and ask that his work be destroyed; he asked this for the sake of the universe whose new mythical concept had been bestowed upon him.

In "the blue notebooks" Kafka wrote: "To what indifference people may come, to what profound conviction of having lost the right track forever."

And: "Our salvation is death, but not this one."

Kafka's prose is a hard surface, as of polished steel, without resonance or exact reflection. It is, as Broch remarked, abstract ("of bare essentials and unconditional abstractness"). It is, as many critics have said, a pure German, the austere German in which the Austro-Hungarian empire conducted its administrative affairs, an efficient, Spartan idiom admitting of neither ornament nor poetic tones. Its grace was that of abrupt information and naked utility.

Christopher Middleton speaks (in a letter) of "the transparent, ever-inquiring, tenderly comical, ferociously paradoxical narrative voice that came to Kafka for his Great Wall of China and Josephine the Singer: Kafka's *last* voice."

The paradox everywhere in Kafka is that this efficient prose is graphing images and events forever alien to the administration of a bureaucracy. Middleton's remark happens in a discussion of the spiritual dance of language.

> I'm reading about Abraham Abulafia, his "mystical experience," theories of music and of symbolic words. There was a wonderful old Sephardic Rabbi in Smyrna, Isaak ha-Kohen, who borrowed and developed a theory, in turn adopted and cherished by Abulafia, about melody, a theory with obviously ancient origins, but traceable to Byzantium, melody as a rehearsal, with its undulatory ups and downs, of the soul's dancing toward ecstatic union with God: to rehearse the soul, bid your in-

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> strumentalists play . . . so melody is a breathing, a veil of breath which flows and undulates, a veiling of the Ruach (spirit). When you listen to recent recreations of Byzantine music, the theory seems more and more childish, but the facts it enwraps become more and more audible—even the *touching* of flute-notes and harp strings enacts the vertiginous conspiracy, the "letting go," out of any succession of instants into an imaginable *nunc stans*, an ingression into "the perfect and complete simultaneous possession of unlimited life" (as dear old Boethius put it). Oddly enough, this (what's "this"?) is the clue to the narrative voice (I conjecture) . . . that came to Kafka for his Great Wall of China.

What Kafka had to be so clear and simple about was that nothing is clear and simple. On his death bed he said of a vase of flowers that they were like him: simultaneously alive and dead. All demarcations are shimmeringly blurred. Some powerful sets of opposites absolutely do not, as Heraclitus said, cooperate. They fight. They tip over the balance of every certainty. We can, Kafka said, easily believe any truth and its negative at the same time.

Lustron und Kastron

Gracchus's *Lebensproblem*, as the Germans say, is that he cannot encounter his opposite and be resolved (or not) into Being or Nonbeing, as the outcome may be.

Opposites do not cooperate; they obliterate each other.

In 1912, at a nudist spa in Austria, Kafka dreamed that two contingents of nudists were facing each other. One contingent was shouting at the other the insult "Lustron und Kastron!"

The insult was considered so objectionable that they fought. They obliterated each other like the Calico Cat and the Gingham Dog, or like subatomic particles colliding into nonexistence.

The dream interested Kafka; he recorded it. He did not analyze it, at least not on paper. He knew his Freud. There are no such words as *lustron* and *kastron* in Greek, though the dream made them Greek. If we transpose them into Greek loan words in Latin, we get *castrum* (castle) and *lustrum* (the five-year-recurring spiritual cleansing of Roman religion). Both words are antonyms, containing their own opposites (like *altus*, deep or high). *Lustrum*, a washing clean, also means filthy; the *cast-* root give us *chaste* and *castrate*. And *lust* and *chaste* play around in their juxtaposition.

At the nudist spa Kafka records, with wry wit, the presence of the two silent Swedish boys (they will, I think, become the clownishly stupid assistants in *The Castle*) whose handsome nudity reminded him of Castor and Pollux, whose names strangely mean Clean and Dirty (our *chaste* and *polluted*). These archetypal twins, the sons of Leda, Helen's brothers, noble heroes, duplicates of Damon and Pythias in friendship, existed alternately. One lived while the other was dead, capable of swapping these states of being. They are in the zodiac as Gemini, and figure in much folklore, merging with Jesus and James.

When Gracchus claims in the "Fragment" that he is the patron saint of sailors, he is lying. Castor and Pollux are the patron saints of sailors, the corposants that play like bright fire in the rigging.

Pollux in Greek has a euphemism for a name: Polydeukes (The Sweet One). When the Greeks felt they needed to propitiate, they avoided a real name (as in calling the avenging Fates the Eumenides). Pollux was a boxer when all fights were to the death.

Dirty and clean, then, *tref* and *kosher*, motivated Kafka's dream. The insult was that one group of nudists were both. Kafka was a nudist who wore bathing drawers, a nonobservant Jew, a Czech who wrote in German, a man who was habitually engaged to be married and died a bachelor. He could imagine "a curious animal, half kitten, half lamb" (derived from a photograph of himself, age five, with a prop stuffed lamb whose hindquarters look remarkably like those of a cat). He could imagine "an Od-

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radek," the identity of which has so far eluded all the scholars.

We live, Kafka seems to imply, in all matters suspended between belief and doubt, knowing and ignorance, law and chance. Gracchus is both prehistoric man, a hunter and gatherer, and man at his most civilized. He thinks that his fate is due to a fall in a primeval forest, as well as to his death ship being off course.

Kafka could see the human predicament from various angles. We live by many codes of law written thousands of years ago for people whose circumstances are not ours. This is not exclusively a Jewish or Muslim problem; the United States Constitution has its scandals and headaches. Hence lawyers, of whom Kafka was one. He dealt daily with workmen's accidents, and their claims for compensation. What is the value of a hand?

His mind was pre-pre-Socratic. His physics teacher had studied under Ernst Mach, whose extreme skepticism about atoms and cause and effect activated Einstein in quite a different direction.

Walter Benjamin, Kafka's first interpreter, said that a strong prehistoric wind blows across Kafka from the past. There is that picture of a Bushman on the wall which Gracchus can see from his bed, "who is aiming his spear at me and taking cover as best he can behind a beautifully painted shield." A Bushman who has not yet fallen off a cliff and broken his neck.

"Mein Kahn ist ohne Steuer, er fährt mit dem Wind, der in den untersten Regionen des Todes bläst."

This is the voice of the twentieth century, from the ovens of Buchenwald, from the bombarded trenches of the Marne, from Hiroshima.

It was words that started the annihilating fight in Kafka's dream, meaningless words invented by Kafka's dreaming mind. They seem to designate opposite things, things clean and things unclean. Yet they encode their opposite meanings. The relation of word to thing is the lawyer's, the philosopher's, the ruler's constant anguish. The word *Jew* (which occurs nowhere in Kafka's fiction) designates not an anthropological race but a culture, and yet both Hitler and the Jews used it as if it specified a race. "The Hunter Gracchus" inquires into the meaning of the word *death*. If there is an afterlife in an eternal state, then it does not mean death; it means transition, and death as a word is meaningless. It annihilates either of its meanings if you bring them together.

The language of the law, of talking dogs and apes, of singing fieldmice, of ogres and bridges that can talk—everything has its *logos* for Kafka. (Max Brod recounts a conversation between Kafka and a donkey in Paris.) Words are tyrants more powerful than any Caesar. When they are lies, they are devils.

The purity of Kafka's style assures us of its trustworthiness as a witness. It is this purity, as of a child's innocence or an angel's prerogative, that allows Kafka into metaphysical realities where a rhetorical or bogus style would flounder. Try to imagine "The Hunter Gracchus" by the late Tolstoy, or by Poe. The one would have moralized, the other would have tried to scare us. Kafka says, "Here is what it feels like to be lost."

As Auden noted, *as if* in Kafka is treated as *is*. To bring *is* to bear on Kafka's *as if* will only annihilate them both.

Fifty children in two rows

We cannot read "The Hunter Gracchus" without being reminded of all the refugee ships loaded to the gunwales with Jews trying to escape the even more packed cattlecars to Auschwitz, turned away from harbor after harbor.

One of the arrangers of some of these ships was Ada Sereni, an Italian Jewish noblewoman whose family can be traced back to Rome in the first century. In September of 1947 she was involved in secret flights of Jewish children from Italy to Palestine. A twin-engine plane flown by two

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Americans was to land at night outside Salerno. Ada Sereni and the twenty-year-old Motti Fein (later to command the Israeli Air Force in the Six Day War) were waiting with fifty children to be taken to a kibbutz. As the plane approached, the fifty were placed in two rows of twenty-five each, holding candles as landing lights in a Sicilian meadow. The operation took only a few minutes, and was successful. The children were in orange groves the next morning. "An der Stubentür klopfte er an, gleichzeitig nahm er den Zylinderhut in seine schwarzbehandschuhte Rechte. Gleich wurde geöffnet, wohl fünfzig kleine Knaben bildeten ein Spaller in langen Flurgang und verbeugten sich."

The SS wore black gloves.

Death ships

Kafka does not decode. He is not referring us to Wagner's "Flying Dutchman" or the myth of the Wandering Jew, or to the pharaonic death ships that had harbors built for them in the empty desert, or to the treasure ships in which Viking lords were laid in all their finery, or to the Polynesian death ships that glided from island to island collecting the dead, or to American Indian canoe burials, or to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, or to any of the ghost ships of legend and folktale. There is a ghostly hunter in the Black Forest. Kafka's ability to write "The Hunter Gracchus" is evidence of what Broch meant when he said that Kafka is the inventor of a new mythology.

Sind Sie tot?

At Auschwitz it was difficult to tell the living from the dead.

Raven and blackbird

Poe's mind was round, fat, and white; Kafka's cubical, lean, and transparent.

Riva

When Max Brod and Kafka visited Riva in September of 1909 it was an Austrian town where 8,000 Italians lived. It sits on the northwest end of Lake Garda. Baedeker's *Northern Italy* for 1909 calls it "charming" and says that "the water is generally azure blue."

Aion

Time in Kafka is dream time, Zenonian and interminable. The bridegroom will never get to his wedding in the country, the charges against Joseph K. will never be known, the death ship of the Hunter Gracchus will never find its bearings.

Circadian rhythm

The opening of "The Hunter Gracchus" is a picture of urban infinity. There is always another throw of the dice. Another newspaper is being printed while today's is being read; a bucket of water must soon be refilled; the fruitseller is engaged in "the eternal exchange of money and goods" (Heraclitus on the shore shaping the sea, the sea shaping the shore); the men in the café will be there again tomorrow; the sleeping man is in one cycle of his circadian rhythm. Play, reading, housekeeping, business, rest: it is against these ordinary peaceful things that Kafka puts the long duration of Gracchus's thousand years of wandering, a cosmic infinity.

A kind of paradox

Reality is the most effective mask of reality. Our fondest wish, attained, ceases to be our fondest wish. Success is the greatest of disappointments. The spirit is most alive when it is lost. Anxiety was Kafka's composure, as despair was Kierkegaard's happiness. Kafka

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said impatience is our greatest fault. The man at the gate of the Law waited there all of his life.

The hunter

Nimrod is the biblical archetype, "a mighty hunter before the Lord" (Gen. 10:9, Jer. 16:16), but the Tegum, as Milton knew, records the tradition that he hunted men ("sinful hunting of the sons of men") as well as animals. Kafka was a vegetarian.

Motion

Gracchus explains to the mayor of Riva that he is always in motion, despite his lying as still as a corpse. On the great stair "infinitely wide and spacious" that leads to "the other world" he clambers up and down, sideways to the left, sideways to the right, "always in motion." He says that he is a hunter turned into a butterfly. There is a gate (presumably heaven) toward which he flutters, but when he gets near he wakes to find himself back on his bier in the cabin of his ship, "still stranded forlornly in some earthly sea or other." The motion is in his mind (his *psyche*, Greek for "butterfly" as well as for "soul"). These imaginings (or dreams) are a mockery of his former nimbleness as a hunter. The butterfly is one of the most dramatic of metamorphic creatures, its transformations seemingly more divergent than any other. A caterpillar does not die; it becomes a wholly different being.

Gracchus when he tripped and fell in the Black Forest was glad to die; he sang joyfully his first night on the death ship. "I slipped into my winding sheet like a girl into her marriage dress. I lay and waited. Then came the mishap."

The mistake causing Gracchus's long wandering happened *after* his death. Behind every enigma in Kafka there is another.

"The Hunter Gracchus" can be placed among Kafka's parables. Are we, the living, already dead? How are we to know if we are on course, or lost? We talk about a loss of life in accidents and war, as if we possessed life rather than life us. Is it that we are never wholly alive, if life is an engagement with the world as far as our talents go? Or does Kafka mean that we can exist but not be?

It is worthwhile, for perspective's sake, to keep the lively Kafka in mind, the delightful friend and traveling companion, the witty ironist, his fascinations with the Yiddish Folk Theatre, with a wide scope of reading, his overlapping and giddy love affairs. He undoubtedly was "as lonely as Franz Kafka" (a remark made, surely, with a wicked smile). We have, however, no record of his enacting a melancholy character.

And some genius of a critic will one day show us how comic a writer Kafka is, how a sense of the ridiculous very kin to that of Sterne and Beckett informs all of his work. Like Kierkegaard, he saw the absurdity of life as the most meaningful clue to its elusive vitality. His humor authenticates his seriousness. "Only Maimonides may say there is no God; he's entitled."

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Poems
by Robert McDowell & Judith Baumel

Emily's courtship

The visitor stands at the grave in knee-high snow.
He's been calling your house since 1962
Asking for you.

Is he a distant or close relation to
That man in Baltimore who annually visits Poe?
Certainly you would know.

And if this man who calls you should break through,
What Loneliness, Time, and Pain must he endure
At your father's door?

Brushing aside that meddling sister of yours
He calls upstairs, "Emily, my darling, my dear,
There is nothing to fear!"

Don't greet him in the frills and curls you acquired late,
Long after the Romantics claimed you,
But come down as you

Always were, your hair tucked in a tight bun,
Your limbs loose in a drab, light summer dress
The color of afternoon sun,

The armpits and a flare up the back darkened with sweat
(For you have been sweeping all morning), your shoes
Dusty, impossibly small.

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Come down to the parlor, dear, and rest.
Don't talk around the corner like a ghost,
Or too sly a host;

That ploy worked well enough on disabled Higginson,
And on ancient Wadsworth, so stiff with God
He couldn't bend.

Do not descend in a cloud of impossible cadences
And punctuation like slaps to the face—this one is yours,
All man and boy, your poetry toy

Who loves your jokes, and your laughter
Like water lapping in Heaven,
Who would take you as you are.

Still you test his devotion, serving him the heavy cake
You made from scratch the night (or the half-century?) before;
Your sister returns, the bore.

Sipping bitter tea she claims each word you say,
Or worse, presumes to say them *for* you.
That just won't do!

Your caller whispers in her ear, "Get lost! Your Sis and I
Need time alone, comprendé?" With your taste for the exotic,
The far-away you'll never see,

That single, foreign word rings like a wedding bell.
You shoo your flesh-and-blood away,
If only for a day.

—*Robert McDowell*

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Vandalism

My sheep was the dragon
and my dragon the sheep.
Neither was happy in the year
he was born.

The detective walked the edge
of parkway, the gold button
on his lapel flaming in the sun,
and nothing was there.

The letters were neat and careful,
though they misspelled "Zionism."
The swastikas were balanced and well shaped.
The glass walls of the children's

classroom were blotted with those red
and black marks
and the sun came mottled through
the paper we'd taped to cover.

The teacher told them
"Someone has *damaged*
the classroom and the synagogue,"
her words slow and tensely neutral.

So graffito should evolve to this.
And we to here—brain
numb, heart racing, waiting
for an oriental or Talmudic miracle.

—*Judith Baumel*

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Theater

Death of the author

by Mark Steyn

Nicholas Hytner cut his teeth on opera and the classics and then directed *Miss Saigon*, which gave him a rare opportunity to work with writers who aren't dead. At the time, he described to me arriving for work one morning and explaining that overnight he'd had some wonderful directorial notion that would involve the authors amending only one small section. The composer, Claude-Michel Schonberg, "gave me a polite look which I broadly interpreted as 'Fuck off and do what we wrote.' " He did.

Happy the author who can say, "Fuck off and do what we wrote." The very same season—1989—Robert Wright, Chet Forrest, and Luther Davis, writers of *Kismet*, were working on *Grand Hotel*. They'd already been forced to sign substandard contracts, paying them well below the Dramatists' Guild minimum and for which they could have been kicked out of the Guild. This is becoming standard practice here, and its impact is disastrous: indeed, one reason that we get so many crummy revivals like *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* is because the estates of deceased authors are usually more compliant when it comes to accepting reduced royalty rates. And the more producers get used to accepting those substandard rates as the norm and the smaller the proportion of the overall budget you have to allocate to the writing, the further the author's status declines in relation to the director.

As things turned out, for Wright, Forrest, and Davis it was only the beginning. In Boston, the director, Tommy Tune, had them banned from the theater. They couldn't ask the Guild to defend the integrity of their script, because they'd signed non-Guild contracts. Further, the play doctor brought in to rewrite the show was Peter Stone, who is the Guild's president. Stone is the American theater's last fixer, a role which often proves tricky to reconcile with his formal position as head of the organization that protects authors' rights. Wright, Forrest, and Davis retreated as gracefully as possible, though the *Playbill* did its best to humiliate them further, with a blizzard of asterisks explaining that this additional number was written by Maury Yeston, that number was originally written by Wright and Forrest but reorganized and rearranged by Yeston, such-and-such a number was written by Yeston based on original material by Wright and Forrest . . .

"Back in the Twenties," Robert Wright told me, "George Pierce Baker said, 'Remember this. A director's theater is a theater in decline.' As marvelous as it may be, someone has still got to sit down with a pencil and paper and write something." Baker, drama professor at Harvard and then Yale, taught, among others, Philip Barry and George Abbott and Eugene O'Neill, back in the days when we still had writers. When *Grand Hotel* fetched up on Broadway, the ads in *The New York Times* and the giant poster above Times Square showed an

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award-festooned Tommy Tune standing astride the musical's logo. He wasn't in it, he didn't write it, but it was his show.

Which way is better? *Miss Saigon* is still playing in London and New York and everywhere else. *Grand Hotel* was a tasteful bore and a strictly local hit, a prime example of the uncommercial commercial theater Broadway now specializes in. We think of all that two-in-the-morning hotel-room fixing as an American theater tradition, but the real American theater tradition is what Cameron Mackintosh defended on *Miss Saigon*. Mackintosh believes in working with the authors until they and he are fully satisfied; a director is then brought in to stage the authors' work: fuck off and do what we wrote. Usually, Mackintosh will sound out two or three or four possible directors simultaneously—something that no producer can do in New York because it annoys the powerful directors' agents. Mackintosh is closer to old-time Broadway hitmakers like Kermit Bloomgarden, who believed that the most important relationship in theater was between the author and his producer, a philosophy vindicated by Bloomgarden's track record—*Death of a Salesman*; *The Crucible*; *The Diary of Anne Frank*; *Look Homeward, Angel*; *Toys in the Attic* . . .

But we don't have that kind of producer in New York anymore. Today, many of them can't even read a script—in the sense of knowing how a play will *play*—which makes them especially vulnerable to directors. Besides, the writers are mostly dead or fled: nobody does what they wrote, so they've fucked off. In the days when Bloomgarden's maxim held, the writer made the drama and then the director staged it. The minute you muddy the waters—the minute you allow the director to think that he *makes* the drama—you're on a slippery slope. Ten, twenty years later, you wake up and realize the street's playing nothing but revivals, because revivals are the only texts robust enough to withstand directorial self-indulgence. Who directed the original production of *Porgy and Bess*? O'Neill's *Marco Millions*? Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*? Rouben Mamoulian, all three. But we've forgotten him because he was too busy helping the authors get their delicate, spindly children up on to their feet to show himself off, to pose for posters in Times Square.

As soon as revivals become your bread and butter, you are, inevitably, a director's theater. That's why opera is the ultimate director's theater, and also why, dramatically, it's a waxworks. But Broadway isn't far behind. In Britain, the two leading subsidized companies—the RSC and the National—are directors' clubs: they're run by and for directors because the bulk of their output is revivals. That means that most of Britain's hotshot stagers make their names with very old plays. For the first time in American theater history, that's now also true of what's left of the Great White Way—though, instead of Shakespeare, Sheridan, and Shaw, New York's superstagers work with less venerated museum pieces, like *Grease* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. What's Jerry Zaks's reputation resting on? *Guys and Dolls*. Jack O'Brien? *Damn Yankees*. Scott Ellis? *She Loves Me*. Even Harold Prince, who swore off revivals for four decades, succumbed to a theme-park *Show Boat*.

The differences aren't just confined to content: when a British director does work with a living author, there's no confusing who the star is. It's Alan Bennett's *Madness of George III*, not Nicholas Hytner's. Both Mackintosh and Michael Codron (the West End's leading straight-play producer) would argue that the system gives you the best of both worlds: new work, staged by directors who bring their years of cumulative experience with Congreve and Wycherly and Mozart and Wilde. It's when Londoners and New Yorkers trade, when a Broadway director stages an ancient play and a British director stages a creaky musical, that the local approaches to a director's theater come into sharper focus. If I had to make a

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sweeping generalization, I'd put it this way: at their best, the British revival boys treat their texts as living authors; too often, the Americans treat their texts the way Tommy Tune treats living authors.

Thus in George C. Wolfe's production of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare is outside the Broadhurst Theatre, banging on the door trying to get in, and calling the Directors' Guild from the pay phone on the corner to find out from Peter Stone what his contractual rights are. Wolfe's *Tempest* has stilt walkers from South America and shadow puppets from Indonesia and plenty of drumming, but they are stilt walking on the play, making puppets of the characters, drumming all over the poetry. A lot of this stuff is the same kind of flashy fireworks Wolfe indulges in in *Bring in 'da Noise/Bring in 'da Funk*, his fashion hit at the Public (discussed last issue). It doesn't matter there, because there's no play to speak of: the evening is a director's riff; you take away images, sounds, attitude. Wolfe has made his name by finding poetry in 'da noise. But give him real poetry, and he's flummoxed. With Shakespeare, there *is* a text, and a director has to at least acknowledge it.

It says everything about Wolfe's failure to do so that he has as his Prospero as fine a Shakespearean actor as Patrick Stewart, yet you leave the Broadhurst having barely registered a single line. Wolfe's *Tempest* is strictly meteorological—sound and fury signifying nothing. He doesn't see it like that: he thinks he's shaken up the play—that it's *Tempest*-tossed. Unfortunately, it's *Tempest*-tossed only in the sense of British slang, where "toss" is a synonym for "masturbate." This is the parasitic arrogance of a director's theater: the text is merely a podium on which the superstager plays with himself.

Once in a while, a bratty British director will make the same mistake with an American musical. Sam Mendes staged *Cabaret* in London two years ago and consciously cast actors rather than singers: it's a tendency of a director's theater to saddle yourself with a liability and then trumpet it as a virtue. Flying in a couple of days before opening, the lyricist Fred Ebb was particularly affronted by the leading man: "They said to me, 'But he played Hamlet last week!' Fine. Let him play Hamlet next week." The actress in the Sally Bowles role couldn't manage the title song, so Mendes decided to rework it as a nervous breakdown, where the number itself literally breaks down. That's the same mistake Wolfe makes with Shakespeare: instead of the staging arising organically from the text, it's imposed on it regardless. If you're determined enough, you can make "Cabaret" a nervous breakdown, but, in doing so, you render the specific-ness of the song redundant: "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" would have worked just as well.

But Mendes is a clever fellow. He's been tipped as successor to Richard Eyre at the National Theatre, but I gather he's decided to stay with the Donmar Warehouse, figuring that youth is on his side and he can wait ten years to take over the National. His career follows a familiar British pattern: like Trevor Nunn, Nicholas Hytner, Declan Donnellan, he's done plenty of Shakespeare, Restoration drama, new plays—and then a big Cameron Mackintosh musical. But the Donmar remains his base. It exists in the same relationship to the West End as the Roundabout Theater Company does to Broadway: a fringe house in the heart of the theater district, it gives a mainstream audience the opportunity to see theoretically more demanding work.

But the comparison is more than just geographic: in the last year, Mendes seems to have been shadowing the Roundabout's output. For example, a few months after the Roundabout revived Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (reviewed here in December 1994), Mendes offered his own version at the Donmar. The original Broadway production offered one of the half-dozen most memorable performances in the American theater—Laurette Taylor as the faded, deluded Amanda Wingfield—and every revival since has struggled to crawl out from under its shadow. At the Round-

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about, Julie Harris was cast too obviously: because she's a serious actress, she gets what survives of serious theater in this country, and has been denied the chance to create any equivalent roles of her own. The result was that the play seemed as faded as Amanda and as musty as her pokey tenement, like a faint reflection seen in a clouded glass. In London, Mendes didn't care about Laurette Taylor or the original's reputation: I doubt he'd even heard of Taylor. Instead, he read the play and couldn't figure out why you needed a woman in her sixties for the lead. Amanda, after all, is the mother of two barely grown-up children: she could be forty, or fifty, but sixty is certainly pushing at the outer limits.

The reason Tennessee Williams wanted Laurette Taylor was not because she was sixty but because she was Laurette Taylor. Unable to shrug off the burden of her triumph, every subsequent production has taken refuge in surface approximation: Julie Harris was actually seventy when she played the part. With the cockiness of youth or following the logic of the text (take your pick), Mendes cast Zoë Wanamaker, a gifted actress in early middle age. At the Roundabout, you felt you were watching Julie Harris playing Laurette Taylor playing Amanda Wingfield. At the Donmar, the Mendes version had a spin of its own: because Zoë Wanamaker has a plausible sexiness, the talk of "gentleman callers" didn't seem like the madness of someone suffocated by their own past, but a strategy for escape. I'm not saying that's the only take on *The Glass Menagerie* or even that it's one I happen to agree with. But it's a point of view, and one that the text will support.

Mendes goes even further in his revival of Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company*. The Roundabout production (reviewed here in November 1995) opened to great notices, sold out its run, and was supposed to transfer to a Broadway house. It didn't. Presumably, the producers finally understood what should have been clear the morning after opening night: the great notices and the sell-out performances were for the play, not the production. Mendes has also had the reviews and the bookings, but his West End transfer is going ahead.

Scott Ellis's staging was paralyzed by the same indecision as Des McAnuff's *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*: he was too scared to do it as a period piece but too lazy to figure out how to make it work for today. Broadway revivalists are mostly musicals men and, on the rare occasions they venture into plays, tend to turn them into musicals with the songs left out (as Ellis did with William Inge's *Picnic*). Considering that they're specialists, they have a marked lack of faith in their chosen form. Like Wolfe with *The Tempest*, they don't see the need to engage with the texts. Their attitude seems to be: look, everyone knows the books of musicals are clunky; let it go, relax, don't worry, be happy. For Mendes, as for Nick Hytner with *Carousel* or Declan Donnellan with the National's *Sweeney Todd*, that isn't enough. If you've been trained to make sense of plays that are centuries old or opera libretti that were never any good in the first place, you can surely do the same for a comparatively recent text.

It's a thankless task being librettist to Stephen Sondheim. The tired line about his songs is that they're like three-act plays—which rather begs the question: if a song is a three-act play in and of itself, why put it in a two-act musical? At the Roundabout, Ellis and choreographer Rob Marshall staged the score as a hit parade for Sondheim buffs; Mendes has started from the other direction, with George Furth's book, and specifically the principal character, Robert. At the Roundabout, as in the original, Robert was an empty vessel, defined by the married couples around him. Mendes has filled him out, and then some.

Updated for the Nineties, Robert is now black and, some new dialogue suggests, bisexual. If that sounds like an over-egged pudding, it's because Mendes has decided to tackle head-on all the issues that have been coyly ducked in previous productions. It works because Adrian Lester has a vivid,

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robust charm: at last, Robert is a protagonist. If you want to poke around a bit more, Mendes has even come up with a reason that the play is staged as an episodic concept musical. The real reason, of course, is that back in 1970 that's what Sondheim and Hal Prince wanted to do, so that's what they did. Scott Ellis was content to defer to that; for Mendes, it wasn't enough. His reasoning is that *Company* is taking place inside Robert's head—and, therefore, the fact that it's a fragmented, episodic, bitty vaudeville is yet more evidence of the fellow's unwillingness to commit.

There are disappointments here: as a company (so to speak), the Roundabout ensemble was stronger; and the choreography at the Donmar is lousy. Mendes has cut "Tick-Tock," the slithering, sensual dance solo made famous by Donna McKechnie in the original and stunningly performed by Charlotte D'Amboise in Ellis's production. British directors are mostly skeptical about dance as an expression of drama: in Trevor Nunn productions, there's always a crunching gear-change when Gillian Lynne gets her contractually stipulated choreographer's moment and Trevor goes off and plays golf for five minutes. Even those directors who are more open-minded have difficulty figuring out a modus operandi with their choreographers. On the National's *Carousel*, Hytner had the Royal Ballet's Kenneth MacMillan, whom he greatly admired; but the dance is still dis-integrated: you know exactly when Nick steps aside and Ken takes over. But that's because British drama is still word based.

One reason that the London theater establishment and the town's drama critics adore Sondheim is because, as they see it, his musicals aspire to the condition of a play. The composer seems flattered by the attention, more willing to rewrite and rethink his pieces in London than in New York. He's in danger of becoming, as Shakespeare is at the RSC, the house dramatist at the National: currently, hard on the heels of *Sunday in the Park with George*

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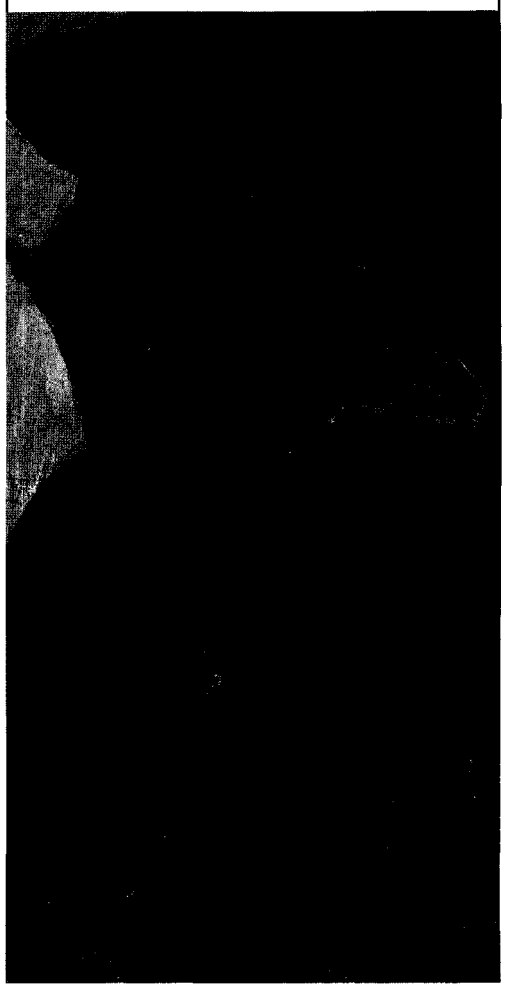

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and *Sweeney Todd*, they're presenting Sean Mathias's production of *A Little Night Music*.

The downside of that bias is that Sheila Gish has received raves for her rendition of "The Ladies Who Lunch," even though she doesn't hit a single right note. For Mendes, that doesn't seem to be any big deal. At such moments, he comes perilously close to championing the unmusical musical, just as with *The Tempest* Wolfe seems to be selling the undramatic drama. Such are the polarizations of a director's theater. In an ideal world, you'd pair the Roundabout's director with the Donmar's choreographer, the Roundabout's supporting cast with the Donmar's leading man. But that requires a self-effacement—a recognition that the show is the real star—that a director's theater is reluctant to make.

If we have to have these distortions, though, the British approach is surely the least worst. The drama has to be the launch pad: get that right, and the choreography will come later. Ignore it, and, like Tommy Tune in Boston, it's patch, patch, patch. Last year, a friend of mine asked me to take a look at an out-of-town tryout for a musical about Joe and Jack Kennedy that he's developing with the Shubert Organization. Act Two was dead on its feet, and everyone had short-cut solutions: "Jackie Kennedy was one of the world's most beautiful women, fer Chrissake. How come, in the whole goddamn Second Act, she never changes her shoes once?" I tried to explain that that wasn't the problem, that giving the show an Imelda Marcos footwear budget wouldn't change things. The problem is that the character and the relationship that the audience have been intrigued by in Act One just disappear in Act Two, and the only way you can solve that is by having the writers write some writing on pieces of paper. It's boring, but there it is. Shoes won't help.

At the height of the superstar directors' era, in 1979, Bob Fosse unveiled *Dancin'*: no plot, no characters, just old songs and slick Fosse razzle-dazzle. On opening night, Alan Jay Lerner sent him a wry telegram: "Congratulations! You did it. You finally got rid of the author." But Fosse's dead, Jerome Robbins has retreated to ballet, and Hal Prince spends half his time on opera. And their successors aren't good enough: Tommy Tune, Jerry Zaks, and the others who've inherited by default can only offer us museum theater; it's like touring a stately home where everything has been fantastically preserved but where nobody lives. In applying the principles of classic plays to musicals, the British are reminding Broadway that all drama has to be involving—even musical comedy, where New York's most recent hits, *City of Angels* and *Crazy for You*, both required British stagers to pull them off.

In the Eighties, the British were seen as expert manufacturers of their own grotesque spectacles. In the Nineties, they pose a new threat: never mind *Cats*, the West End has now begun annexing Broadway's back catalogue.

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Dance

Mark Morris at BAM

by Laura Jacobs

The lights never quite came up during the Mark Morris Dance Group's December performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.[1] Toward the end of both programs —an array of dances that included two world premières and six New York premières—one felt deflated by the dusk, as if sitting there in sunglasses. Was the consistently low wattage simply a coincidence of repertory? Could it be that Michael Chybowski, who lit all but two of the dances, prefers gloom? Maybe the lighting was metaphorical, an atmospheric dimming that is its own aside or shadow or subtext.

Morris's last engagement at BAM was a GE-light-bulb of an idea called *The Hard Nut*, a TV-age take on *The Nutcracker* that was nothing if not bright—the better to see the suburban subversion onstage. This winter's engagement came to us in a different spirit. As usual, there was the flurry of press previews that always petal the path to a Morris performance in New York City. Interviewers still like to label the choreographer Baby Balanchine, while the gay press eagerly explicates his work in the same way new musicologists search for queer chords in Tchaikovsky and Schubert. But this time Morris's tone was one of reflection, of hubris subdued, and of faint irritation with the fawning. He's been making dances for fifteen years now, and the brilliant upstart has settled into middle-period stature.

A Morris program today, as various as its subjects and scores may be, is a mix of three basic compositional modes: the dance with sung libretto, the dance with instrumental accompaniment, the Morris solo. The dances with librettos dominate, and it is both Morris's strength and his weakness. At BAM, five of the dances had sung texts throughout or in parts, and they are testament not just to Morris's professed love of the human voice (he likens song to dance, organic arts that come from the body), but to self-knowledge: Morris has always had a gift for swift storytelling, for mime gesture given a metaphorical spin. We saw the gift born fully formed in the early *Gloria* (Vivaldi), and it found a particularly palpable expression in the evening-length work *Dido and Aeneas*. Indeed, this dance, set to that Baroque pearl of an opera Purcell wrote for a girls' school performance, is an architectural marvel, with pantomime dovetailing into design, and Morris's flatfooted, *faux primitif* style of movement corresponding with the kind of game and ungainly performance you'd expect from a student recital.

Dido showed how well Morris works when all his similes are in place—how the libretto supports a series of interlocking associations, and how historical fact lives inside a dance movement. Words bring an

1 Mark Morris Dance Group performed two programs comprising nine dances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music from December 9, 1995 to December 17.

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extra dimension to the stage, providing a key to meaning which deepens the "text" of the choreography. But beware. A libretto also puts over dances that don't have enough going on otherwise. Morris's large-scale dance to Handel, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*, embraced by many as a masterpiece, has been overrated since its première in 1989. Despite moments of delight (pictorial moments—no surprise), the dance is repetitive, monotonously paced, and stretched shockingly thin at the end. The literalness that worked so well in *Dido* here looks plainly unsophisticated, an imposed innocence that says less about the poetics of Utopia than the politics (it's a summer camp in which men and women go their separate ways—equals yes, partners no).

The text-based works on these December BAM programs fell in between *Dido* and *L'Allegro*, and were of all types and sizes. *Somebody's Coming to See Me Tonight*, a suite of dances set to songs by Stephen Foster, was a world première and it fared better than another recent ballet to Foster, Twyla Tharp's *Americans We*, premièred at ABT last spring. Where Tharp attempted to have it both ways, making grand sentimental statements in the key of irony, Morris played it straight, illustrating a suite of small-town scenes shaded Agnes de Mille, daguerreotype dusty. I couldn't help feeling that here were the true Act One *Nutcracker* dances that Morris's disco version had displaced. Then there was the pas de trois, *A Spell*, a randy Shakespearean romp between two lovers and Cupid (danced by Morris) to the music of John Wilson. *Bedtime*, set to three songs by Franz Schubert, has only one memorable section, the last, in which Goethe's twilight tale of a child's stolen soul is told in breathless dancing tableaux—a German-Romantic *Perils of Pauline*.

Jesu, Meine Freude (music by Bach) belongs to the cathedral wing of Morris's repertory; it is a solemn affair that uses ceremonial symmetry and crosslike religious iconography as a kind of sacred spring to which it keeps returning. *World Power*, the engagement's other world première, just squeaks into the category of dances with text. With only a short, satiric paragraph by Mark Twain sung twice toward the end—from his *Homage to Pacifica*—it was the most successful of these works, perhaps because Morris had to invent without words right from the start.

The piece is choreographed with economy and a sustained pulse. In fact, in twenty minutes of dance Morris says at least as much as Ping Chong said in his hour-and-a-half multi-media piece *Chinoiserie*, which played at BAM in November. And Morris says it better. Lou Harrison's gamelan music is mysterious and dark-toned, like wind chimes in the night, and Morris brings out dancers in Noh black, shadow dancers. He shows us cultural appropriation at work—the misreading, the misapplication, the miscegenation—not through slides and talks, but through a seasoning of Hindu postures and motifs, through the compositional devices of repetition and still centers and Kabuki-like face-offs.

Morris also gives an inside nod to a precursor in the Eastern-influenced minimalist genre of contemporary dance, Laura Dean. But where Dean explored the compulsions, the concentrations that reside in a decorative abstraction (her dances could look like unrolling Greek key borders), Morris makes the genre his own by layering in narrative. As the choir sings of burned and buried Filipinos, dancers fall onstage from the wings, only to be quickly dragged back into oblivion: falling bodies themselves become a decorative border, the line between two peoples.

The finale is a dissolve into masterly counterpoint, the kind you watch and can't plot out, it just opens and doubles, enfolds and fourfolds, mutating before your eyes—an opium dream, a fantasia. And yet, as compressed and formally intelligent as *World Power* is, it isn't stirring. Morris is speaking to the eye and mind—not to the heart. I admire these dances, but I rarely love them or feel driven to see them once more (and when a dance gets you, you want

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to see it again instantly, right then and there). What's missing?

For one thing, it begins to dawn on you that there is very little sexuality on the Mark Morris stage. When it does appear, it is camped up (*A Spell*), cross-dressed (*Dido*), made diminutive (*Somebody's Coming to See Me Tonight*), or deconstructed (*Striptease*). I do not mean this as a criticism, for these dances work as what they are. It's just that what they are—the clever math, musicianship, wit—is not enough. It's a simple fact of most dance that the display of godlike bodies is the first impact, the jaw-dropping double take that excites us and pulls us in. It is also a fact that Morris isn't interested in making this kind of connection with the audience. Okay. Romantic situations are another draw (the Romeo-and-Juliet-Forever school of dance). A choreographer who chooses not to engage in conventional romantic intimacies, however, must come up with another sort of intimacy. Merce Cunningham's choreography, for instance, never tells stories or makes dates, but to see his dancers slowly partner is to be present in Time's bedroom, to feel the heat of the footlights and the intake of breath.

Morris doesn't "do" intense partnering. In my memory the closest he's come is in *One Charming Night*, a Victorian love duet that becomes a vampire seduction. This miniature is potent and unforgettable, largely because its two dancers are face to face, taking each other in and yearning, we soon learn, for something unnameable. It is also a dance in which Morris—beautifully—points his toes. And that brings us to the most important form of intimacy which Morris tends to forego: lower body articulation. His dances call for floppy thighs, loose knees, and relaxed toes, and there is little juice coursing from pelvis to foot. Perhaps that's why, when Morris's dancers fall to the floor, as they often do, it seems such a short drop—a plop. Morris would himself admit that conventionally stretched and lovely legs don't interest him. He's an upper body choreographer—a brain man—and all that upper body signing and gesturing connects back to words, to ears, to hearing. *Jesu, Meine Freude*, with its sense of God bodied forth in taut palms and wide-spread arms, the legs having hardly more effect than podiums or pedestals, comes to seem a sermon in another language, mystical but unmoving.

The region from the waist down is prime and primal terrain. Classical ballet shows it to be an expressive realm of awesome, intricate, and sophisticated power. Even Martha Graham—long-waisted, short-legged, dead set on an earthbound dance—worked primarily southward from the gut. The groin is the engine of virtuosity, and moderns from Graham to Taylor to Cunningham knew they needed it to give their dances might—and *height*, a dance property that's less about raised arms than energized arches. Morris's dances are extremely horizontal, riding about waist high; this is why they can look so flattened, especially when the stage is full of dancers.

Because its phrases were girded in the pelvis and tempered in the heels, toes, and soles; because it created its own complex text in the tactile sighs and sounds of deft shoes; and because a world seemed to open around it; *The Office* was the best piece on these BAM programs. The music is Antonin Dvořák's "Five Bagatelles for String Trio and Harmonium" (op. 47), and the curtain lifts on a view of chairs upstage as six people begin a group dance. Folk motifs echo both in the music and in Morris's floor and foot patterns, where his rhythms mimic the casual, anecdotal conversation of people waiting together. When an austere, grey-suited women enters with a clipboard and takes one dancer away, the group is suddenly a community and a chill sets in. Each of the five bagatelles ends with another dancer led offstage, and with each diminishment there is a growing sensation of shared dialect and shared apprehension. Morris's dances are Gepetto-ish woodcuts, redolent of Eastern European workshops. The bagatelles are autumnal, intoning the end of the Old World (old world/new

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world—the Dvořák dichotomy). There are unmistakable global overtones to Morris's ominous view of office, or perhaps, hospital politics. But *The Office* is both smaller and larger than politics. It's a portrait of the Fate created by humans—a fable as old as the hills and still pure suspense.

Power as an idea—political, tribal, spiritual power—is more interesting to Morris than power as expression, which is probably why his work for ballet companies has lately been so weak. Star power has never had a place in this company (when Baryshnikov dances with Morris, he's Misha Doe, indistinguishable from the rest), nor is there much room for, or pleasure taken in virtuosity for its own sake. Morris's *Lucky Charms* spells out the difference, wearing a thesis on its sequined sleeve. Choreographed to the incessantly arch *Divertissement* of Jacques Ibert, it sends up those smiling cheerleaders of power: marching bands, drill teams, pompom people. The dance is leeringly upbeat (except for when it's nosing around in the dark), a play of crude over-emphasis and dank undertone. It's a sneer, and the dancers look awful in it. Morris makes his point—organized force is ugly—but he doesn't win it. Given a choice, I'd rather watch halftime.

No doubt there are fans who can explain the new nature of a dancer's virtuosity in Morris's work, can describe in detail the unseen difficulty of doing this or that step. Certainly his choreography requires stamina. But to me the company is *jolie-laide* at best, an earnest, dowdy bunch carrying on the good work of Mark Morris. Never dazzling in their own right, the dancers are never very interesting. In the murk, one can hardly see their faces. With Morris it's another story. The Morris solo is a law unto itself and when he takes the stage, the problems disappear. Even appearing with the group, he's special. In *A Spell*, his Cupid wears the wings of sublime comic timing—he tilts his head with perfect Mannerist blandness; holds a pose two silly seconds too long; runs lumpily, a prematurely tall Isadorable. It's Trocadero humor in the idiom of the Rococo, utterly direct. In *The Office*, Morris loses himself in the group with endearing concentration—he moves like a regular guy working in the mail room.

Morris's solo on the BAM bill was *Rondo*. The music is one of Mozart's piano soliloquies (Rondo in A minor, K. 511), a voice we know best from the adagios of his concertos—so reasonable, so seeing, and yet so small in the face of something larger. Morris makes it a round of private dialogue, full of momentary resolves and rumbling undercurrents. It is a long, flowing solo, with few movements that outrank the others. What you remember is Morris: his rumpled leaps, like cumulus clouds; his deeper breathing as the dance repeats, deepening its movement grooves; his unguarded face. The solo is not an essay on a subject, as Morris's dances for others frequently seem to be, but a public prayer, a confession phrased with classical restraint. With his heavenly hair and loose-cloth costumes, Morris has often given himself angelic airs, but here he's uncertain of the fit. When he moves downstage like a saint coming down a path, hands lifted chest high as if to impart some word, he ends the gesture in a shrug—and the phrase becomes a refrain of absence, a dropped stitch in the dance's weave: no word, no knowing. In *Rondo* Morris offers illumination instead of ideas, breakthrough to the lift and dip of his heart.

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Art

Christopher Wilmarth

by Mario Naves

The conundrum of art criticism lies in writing about a subject that, by its very nature, eludes literary extrapolation. This is why it is easier, if not easy, writing about bad or so-so art: failed painting or sculpture lends itself more readily to explaining why it is what it is. Writing about art that is successfully realized on its own terms is another matter. Metaphor is the best a critic can do in writing about art, but even that only goes so far. After all, how much can one really say about a Fra Angelico?

I was reminded of this quandary while visiting the recent exhibition of sculpture by Christopher Wilmarth (1943–1987).[1] This is not to say that the merits of Wilmarth's sculpture, which are considerable, accord him a status alongside the Florentine master. Nor am I suggesting that writing well about art is an impossibility—although given the inanity of much current criticism one might think so. But Wilmarth's sculpture succeeds so completely *as sculpture* that words can only give the barest indication of what the work is like. Firsthand experience is paramount. Which is, of course, how it should be.

The exhibition at Hirschl & Adler Modern includes eight abstract sculptures and one drawing. Seven of the sculptures are from the early to mid-Seventies with one work, from Wilmarth's more figurative "Breath" series, from 1981. Wilmarth's signature sculpture utilizes sheets of glass, often curved and etched with hydrofluoric acid, bound together by wire or steel supports. They owe much to Constructivism and Minimalism, and there is a nuts-and-bolts simplicity to the work. In *Grey Stream* (1973), for example, the way in which a single wire threads together the two curving panels of glass—one frosted, the other a smoky charcoal—appears matter-of-fact. There is a workmanlike satisfaction in following the path the wire travels, going through and behind *Grey Stream,* to the nails on the wall. Wilmarth shows us the mechanics as if to say, This is how it's done.

Wilmarth's sculpture, however, has none of Minimalism's dogmatic insistence on the literalness of the object; nor, one guesses, did he have much patience for "what you see is what you get," as Frank Stella famously put it. So if *Grey Stream* is a no-nonsense object, it is also more than decoration. Wilmarth's sculpture might be classified as Minimalism-plus, that plus being the work's ability to evoke experience through its material means. There's a moving—and, at times, spooky—sense of place in the work that is both specific and elusive. Wilmarth achieves this primarily through the crisp interplay of materials and a dense light that is entirely his own. Faced with the terse beauty of Wilmarth's sculpture, one

1 "Christopher Wilmarth: Sculpture" opened at Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York, on January 5, 1996, and remains on view through February 10.

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is reminded of how fatuous Stella's maxim really is.

If there are artists who are "painter's painters," then Wilmarth might be considered a sculptor's sculptor, exploring the junctures between materials and the frisson that occurs because of them. Tension is generated through the concise play of materials and we are engaged by minute calibrations of incident. Sometimes, however, minutiae is just minutiae. Both *Layer* (1970) and *Sonoma* (1973) feel like exercises rather than complete works of art and are stymied by a Minimalist bluntness. Certainly they evince the artist's formal intelligence. *Sonoma*, in particular, with its surgically abrupt zip of wire, suffices as problem-solving and, as such, gives us some insight as to Wilmarth's working process. But, as sculpture, both *Sonoma* and *Layer* sit dumbly on the wall. Once they're over, they're over.

Is/Was (Softly) (1975–76), a panel of etched glass slipped diagonally through a low steel frame, avoids this shortcoming. Wilmarth's use of frosted glass is somewhat theatrical, but it's also pointed and generates a certain mystery. Here it serves as a scrim that both reveals and obscures its armature. Among the largest pieces in the show, *Is/Was (Softly)* conveys an intimacy that belies its size. As one walks around it, tracing the surface of the glass, the rigidity of the steel support shifts and blurs, becoming ghostly and delicate—a tough act for a sculpture that has something of the functionality of furniture. This delicacy is achieved through a selective use of muscle; Wilmarth never lets us forget the tangibility of each sculpture's underpinnings. But *Is/Was (Softly)* is also uncannily evanescent. It performs the eerie feat of denying its own materiality, as does the best of Wilmarth's sculpture.

Given Wilmarth's strengths as a sculptor's sculptor, it should be noted that his sculpture is very painterly. Part of this is due to the application of acid to the glass surfaces, resulting in broad, brushy areas of incident. (I was reminded of kindred passages found in the paintings of Richard Diebenkorn.) The visual tingle set off by the glimmers of unetched glass surrounding the wire supports of *Arbor for Two Greys* (1974), for instance, would be the envy of many a painter. But Wilmarth also plays with notions of light, atmosphere, and format that are distinctly pictorial. If *Layer* toys with the idea of sculpture as painting, *Remain* (1972), with its velvety haze and fragmented "frame," does so in a manner that avoids being indeterminate or arch. It's a sculpture that one desperately wants to look *in*, as if it were a painting.

It is tempting to use the word "spiritual" in speaking of Wilmarth's sculpture because it can seem so otherworldly. (It has been compared to Rothko's late paintings.) As a rule, I am skeptical of this tag, because it is often a ruse for painting and sculpture of skimpy means and skimpier quality. While I can't deny the convenience or appropriateness of the spiritual label, it does make Wilmarth's sculpture sound a bit flighty. And this is, in every sense of the word, grounded work, sculpture of a distinctly urban nature. Its worn steel surfaces and, in particular, the filtered greyish light of the etched glass will feel like home for a lot of New Yorkers, as will the work's ability to suggest a fleeting beauty that can, at times, occur in the least likely of places. (There's a marvelous moment in one of Wilmarth's letters when he describes walking through the Red Hook section of Brooklyn as a "celebration.") Those who cherish the handmade may find Wilmarth's use of industrial materials anonymous and distancing. But this is an anonymity, one feels, born not of inhumanity (or modesty) but of an artist simply getting out of the viewer's way.

The single work in the exhibition that doesn't have this quality is *When Winter on Forgotten Woods Moves Somber* (1981) from the Breath series, a group of work in various media based on poems by Mallarmé. Unlike the rest of the sculpture on view, it is figurative and disturbingly so. While it does appear on the gallery checklist, the folks at Hirschl & Adler have wisely relegated it to

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the back office away from the rest of the exhibition; considering the seclusion of this placement, it's questionable if the gallery wants viewers to see the work at all. The sculpture's central form is a punctured glass ovoid—a blown-glass head—placed on a bronze plaque, the latter covered by a painterly splatter of bluish green. It is, certainly, a sensitively crafted object, but when compared with the other sculptures in the show, *When Winter on Forgotten Woods Moves Somber* is simply garish, melodramatic. Do we really need a three-dimensional equivalent of a Francis Bacon painting? (I don't buy the comparisons to Giacometti.) Admittedly, I am less familiar with Wilmarth's later work, of which this is an example, and perhaps a more thorough selection from this series would elucidate its values. Let's hope so.

"Poetry" is another word often used in describing Wilmarth's sculpture, and it's not difficult to understand why. The paradoxes inherent in his sculpture lend themselves to such an analogy, and to employ it isn't critical laziness. It's apt. The best description of Wilmarth's sculpture comes from the artist himself, a sculptor who wrote poetry and took inspiration from Mallarmé. "I was always on the lookout for a place with the light just so and the colors right," Wilmarth said, "and if I was quiet . . . I would become transparent and be part of the place I was in." Such a statement, in the hands of a lesser artist, would portend the worst kind of New Age hooey. But, in Wilmarth's case, it is succinct and true. His "physical poems" (Wilmarth's phrase) are of such penetrating beauty and sculptural conviction that they cannot help but distinguish him as one of the finest sculptors of the late twentieth century.

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Music

Janáček & the Norman conquest

by John Simon

Somewhat along the lines of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's well-known essay "The Aporias of the Avant Garde," one could write a piece about the aporias of opera today. Especially so as one contemplates the production of Leoš Janáček's *The Makropulos Case* at the Metropolitan Opera, the first time the venerable house has mounted that great but demanding work.

It is not that opera as such has lost its validity or appeal for our era; the problem is merely its feasibility. With the need for education apparently a recessive gene, with our schools teaching little of value and even that poorly, and with universal ignorance fostered by all the media spurred on by television, the taste for and cultivation of opera is ipso facto imperiled. Add to this the economic climate of global cooling, and subsidies for this costliest form of theater may prove to be less and less forthcoming. Hence the contradictory needs for higher ticket prices and greater ticket sales. And, worst of all perhaps, the necessity of self-defeatingly large opera houses.

A person attending the Met, even in a good and expensive seat, but perhaps short of the very best, gets to experience an opera only slightly more faithfully than someone at an art opening attended by milling multitudes of cocktail-sipping, canapé-munching, yaketty-yakking clutterers gets to absorb the art works on exhibit. But at an art exhibit, you know at least that you were unable to see the art properly; in a vast opera house you might still delude yourself into believing that you caught the opera.

To be sure, there are operas of epic dimensions that lend themselves to being blared and blasted out (call it *yell canto*), the archetype being *Aida*, usually performed with elephants of at least the two-legged variety. But modern opera has become progressively more inward, intimate, psychological in both music and words; even such a work as *Intermezzo*, by the master of mammoth orchestrations, Richard Strauss, requires a small house in order to register. It has never been heard at the Met, and wouldn't be even if it were mounted.

What exactly gets lost? In a word, everything. The orchestral music either doesn't envelop you properly—comparable to watching a superb movie on a TV screen—or you miss all the telling instrumentational details. The singers are caught between the Scylla of becoming inaudible and the Charybdis of straining to the point of stridency. From most locations, the dramatic action is seen as if through opera glasses that have only the wrong end. Yet even with powerful field glasses you see only cutouts of the total picture, and your arms get mighty tired. You also miss the surtitles or, in this case, seat titles, as the eponymous Met Titles on the seat in front of you should be called. It is true that distance improves the aspect of many a singing pachyderm, but, then again, it does not help to turn the stage pictures into comic-strip size.

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Of course, the cognoscenti will condescendingly inform you that opera is about singing, not about how the performers look or act. That, to me, is like saying that food is only about filling your belly, nothing else. It amazes me how supposed experts can revel in such crippling vandalization; would genuine literati cherish poetry merely for its sound? It is, I suppose, Utopian to expect minimal sightliness from the singers along with some acting ability, or at least the good will of seeking out some serious histrionic coaching. Under present conditions, I can just imagine how far the management would get imposing even rudimentary requirements of this sort on the overpaid and overpampered stars of the Lewis Carroll world of opera. Yet it can happen. When the Finnish National Opera came to the Met with two performances of Aulis Sallinen's *The Red Line*, we had an instance of the work, the conducting, the orchestral playing, the singing, the acting, the stage direction, the set and costume design coming together in flawless beauty and harmony. And the Finnish singers even looked good. At *Makropulos*, things were rather different.

In the first place, Janáček should be performed only in Czech, as he has been even at the Met, but not, I daresay, when a megalomaniacal mastodon refuses to learn a part in a difficult, alien language. The composer spent his life studying and jotting down the melodies of not only human speech, but also the sounds of objects and natural phenomena, and lovingly wedding his music to them. His notes are not just notes in music, they are also vocables of speech. An English translation—especially one taking as many dubious liberties as this one by the stage director, Elijah Moshinsky, the conductor, David Robertson, and the diva, Jessye Norman, none of whom knows Czech—is insult added to injury. Even semantically and grammatically, this is a mess: we get such things as "a verbal deposition" for "oral," "there were letters, an enormous amount" for "number," and so on. And what are those Met Titles for, if not to supply a running translation? Nothing, if Jessye Norman, the diva on whom, shamefully, ticket sales depend, won't sing in Czech. Given the fancy, pseudo-refined, quasi-British accent the diva from Augusta, Georgia, has sucked out of her thumb, she might as well have been singing in Volapük for greater comprehensibility.

Next, like any decent work, *Makropulos* should have been protected from director's and designer's theater, however much gawkers gush about such things. Here we start with a hard, black outer curtain (painted plywood?) that can also act as a frame, and has white scribbles all over it, in Greek, Arabic, and maybe fantasy script—alchemical formulas, I assume. When it goes up, during the overture, we get an inner curtain of burlap in loose folds, suggesting the entrance to a hut in the tropics. A handful of men in B-movie Central European secret-police attire dismantle this curtain bit by bit, revealing a huge photographic blow-up of Miss Norman. Enough nonsense to divert attention from the splendid overture.

For Act One, Anthony Ward has designed an expressionistic law office, with a wall of filing cabinets stretching up, up, and out of sight, and with a similarly topless sliding ladder leaning against it. To our left is a huge, slanted, plate-glass window, through which abstract patterns and the Norman photo-panel can be discerned. Act Two is meant to take place on an empty opera stage, with just a platform and a chair on it. Ward gives us an immense gilded Sphinx with the face of an epicene imbecile—a movable beast with, between its vicious paws, a set of steps leading up to a platform and Egyptian banquette. The backdrop is first a cloudy night sky, then a lowered bright red trapezoid backcloth. The floor is blanketed with red roses, roses, as though a Cynara-haunted Ernest Dowson had had an all-night fling there. In Act Three, supposedly a hotel room, we get that huge, slanting, plate-glass window acting as the back wall, with—guess what?—the ubiquitous Jessye mural staring at us through

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it. Also anachronistic Art Deco furnishings. At the end, Emilia Marty, the 337-year-old singer (in the Met translation only 317, perhaps to make Miss Norman seem less old), decides not to renew her life for another three centuries, and hands the secret formula to the young budding singer Kristina, who, horrified, puts a candle to it as Emilia collapses in liberating death. Not so in this staging and design. Here the huge Jessye icon goes up in the flames of many candelabra as Jessye-Emilia, her arms outstretched, heads like the similarly quasi-immortal heroine of Rider Haggard's *She* for the rejuvenating fire. If the formula, or Emilia, got burned, I did not see it.

No less preposterous than the sets are Dona Granata's costumes. To itemize merely the combined garishness and inappropriateness of the sequin-heavy, metallic-looking things Miss Norman gets to wear would fill up this entire column. Suffice it to say that she generally looks like something out of the Greenwich Village Halloween parade; her piled-up and beribboned hairdo alone could comfortably shelter a sea eagle's aerie. One more example of Miss Granata's work: Kristina, the modest law-clerk's daughter and struggling opera chorister gets to wear an haute couture evening gown way beyond her means.

Now for the casting. Miss Norman cannot begin to suggest a beauty who for three centuries has been driving men to madness or suicide, though she might perhaps have scared little children to death. Worse, she towers over one of her current lovers, Albert Gregor; as incarnated by Graham Clark, he is a pugnacious bantam rooster who seems to be pecking at Miss Norman's navel. But at least he tries to act, which is more than Miss Norman deigns to do. Marie Plette, the sweet young Kristina, is a blowsy thirty-year-old at best. As old Hauk-Šendorf, Antony Laciura wears a mantle of cobwebs, and altogether carries on like Rapunzel's evil dwarf. As the dusty lawyer Kolenatý, the huge and magnificent Donald McIntyre overshadows the chubby Håkan Hagegård, as Prus, the supposedly dashing boulevardier and Emilia Marty's other current lover. Only William Burden, making his debut in the small part of Janek, looks, acts, and sings absolutely right.

As for the staging, Elijah Moshinsky has always struck me as a mediocrity, even in the nonmusical theater, working with real actors. Here he has directed for what strikes me as maximum lifelessness, except for those swarming secret policemen, who, however, are not in the text. Typically, when Prus receives a letter informing him that, partly through his fault, his son has just committed suicide, Moshinsky allows Hagegård, one of opera's better actors, to brush it off as if it were a dunning note from his tailor.

David Robertson, the young American conductor making his Met debut, seems not to have grasped the Janáček idiom. He did not make the spiky parts of the music biting enough, or the gloriously lyrical last pages sufficiently rapturous. The singing was equally disappointing. Miss Norman no longer has an upper register; in the lower, she lets her pitch wander, which is particularly damaging in Janáček. As Gregor, Graham Clark produced an unpleasantly shrill, metallic sound, fine for the villain he was in *The Ghosts of Versailles*, but unsuited to an ardent lover. As Prus, his opposite number in litigation and love, Håkan Hagegård, a fine but fading singer, sounded colorless. The strong-voiced Donald McIntyre was rather too Wagnerian for Kolenatý; Mary Plette was nil as Kristina; and Anthony Laciura, abetted by his creepy costume, made Hauk-Šendorf sound spooky rather than touching.

What drama there was in this misbegotten *Makropulos Case* came from the outside. On the scheduled opening night, January 5, Richard Versalle, who sang the law clerk Vítek, was scurrying up and down that ladder to one of the higher file drawers. A few minutes into the opera, he was standing about fifteen feet up (the Met, later, claimed only ten), examining the files of Prus vs. Gregor, and singing, "Too bad you can only

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live so long." His voice flatted on the last note, he let go of the ladder and plummeted to the stage floor with, given his bulk, a sickening thud. A doctor and some stage hands rushed onstage as he lay there on his back, with only the left hand twitching. Then the curtain came down.

An announcement was promptly made that the performance would resume in twenty minutes. "But who," I asked Peter G. Davis, *New York* magazine's music critic, "will sing Vítek? The ghost of Versalle?" Forty minutes later, Joseph Volpe, the Met's general manager, announced that the singer had suffered a heart attack up on the ladder, that he had been taken to St. Luke's Hospital, and that the show would not go on. Back home, television announced that, at the New York City Opera [*sic*] the sixty-three-year-old Versalle fell off a ladder and died shortly upon arrival at the hospital. For some days, the cause of death remained uncertain: heart attack or fall from the ladder? Apparently the former, for the widow is not suing the Met.

The première was postponed until the next scheduled performance, Monday, January 8, the day of the great blizzard, and had to be canceled once more. When it finally did take place, on Thursday, January 11, the opening scene was restaged in resolutely horizontal fashion. The sliding ladder leaning skyward was ignored by one and all. Vítek, now sung by Ronald Naldi, never mounted higher than the desk top on which he briefly perched. The only file anyone used was in a shoulder-level drawer. No one fell off anything; only the scene fell dramatically flat, accurately presaging what was to follow. Had Janáček witnessed this *Makropulos* massacre, he would have begged the Met to get off his *Case*.

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Two extraordinary pianists

by James F. Penrose

The next time you get into the car, turn the radio on to a classical music station. Odds are that a work will already be playing. Try to identify the composer and the piece. This may be easy or difficult depending on the obscurity of the composer (the list seems endless, even for composers grouped by a particular suffix: Zerlini, Rutini, Sacchini, Martini, Tartini . . .), the work (Bruckner's Double Zero Symphony or anything by pupils of Weber or Mendelssohn is just scratching the surface), or both. For experienced practitioners, the ultimate test is the correct identification of the performer. While this may seem *recherché*, certain artists are relatively easy to spot due to their highly individual tonal characteristics and repertoires. New York audiences recently had the opportunity to hear two such individuals at Carnegie Hall. The pianists Earl Wild and Leon Fleisher each possess an unmistakable style and, at their respective recitals, chose programs that emphasized those styles to the utmost.[1]

Both pianists have enjoyed unusual careers, even by the standards of the profession. A pupil of Egon Petri (himself a student of the great Italian pianist Ferruccio Busoni), Mr. Wild has long been celebrated for his technique. Scales and arpeggios of incredible evenness, chords that sing or crunch, a pianissimo that penetrates into lead, and, above all, a soaring legato are some of the means by which Mr. Wild has turned skeptics of the great and forgotten works of the nineteenth century into listeners, if not enthusiasts.

Mr. Fleisher presents a different case. He is a living example of the truism that you can't keep a good man down. After a meteoric rise to fame, especially as an interpreter of Brahms, he began to suffer from a periodic paralysis of his right hand. Like Sir Thomas Beecham, who aspired to the recital hall until he had his own right-hand problems, Mr. Fleisher began a career as a conductor, but, unlike Sir Thomas, always felt the need to keep his hand in, so to speak. While able, from time to time, to perform bimanually, discretion has prompted him to continue his performing career by mastering the left-hand repertoire. Indeed, he may well be the greatest living pianist in this specialized discipline.

Mr. Wild began his recital with his own enhancement of the last movement of Handel's E-major harpsichord suite, familiarly termed "The Harmonious Blacksmith." The original of this piece is itself a finger-twister: its comparatively brief duration is offset by tricky writing requiring a clear, limpid line delivered at high speed. But sometimes you can have too much of a good thing. "The Harmonious Blacksmith" is already a well-ornamented work, and putting a few more

1 Earl Wild appeared at Carnegie Hall, New York, on November 27, 1995. Leon Fleisher appeared at Carnegie Hall on December 6, 1995.

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wing mirrors and strips of chrome on the outside of this particular vehicle didn't seem to raise its sticker price. Mr. Wild's version, for all of its enjoyably perilous runs, newly discovered inner voices, and rich harmonies, fell short. More effective was the lushly tropical transcription of Rachmaninoff's early song *Midsummer Nights* (op. 14, no. 5), which was featured in the second half of the program.

Mr. Wild continued with an understated reading of Beethoven's E-flat Sonata (op. 31, no. 3), and the second-movement *Scherzo* was particularly fine. One of the joys of Mr. Wild's technique is its utter clarity even at prestissimo velocity and pianissimo levels. The effectiveness of this device was amply demonstrated when Mr. Wild commenced the *Scherzo* at greatly reduced volume, prompting two older gentlemen across the row to lean forward expectantly. At bar 35, just after a little *ritardendo* passage, Beethoven starts the transition to the second subject with two F-major chords marked *ff*. Well! Mr. Wild went full throttle, snapping the chords at thundering volume, and the two gentlemen fell backwards in their seats, shook their dazed heads slightly, and smiled at each other.

Chopin's peculiarly named *Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise* provided a rousing conclusion to the first half of the program. Dating from 1834, the work is divided into a lyrical *Andante* introduction featuring a barcarolle-like rolling figure in the left hand against a songlike melody in the right. Soon, this leads into an exultant *Polonaise* that compares quite favorably to Chopin's other compositions in the genre. The split personality of the piece is an excellent metaphor for Chopin's own divided character—wistful dreamer and glittering technician—without the burden of that melancholy tinge that informs much of his work. In Mr. Wild's hands, the *Andante* had more character than the usual walk-in-the-moonlight interpretations, while the silvery tone, eloquent voicing, high-speed legato pedaling, and biting chords of the *Polonaise* brought to mind Chopin's envious mutterings while listening to Franz Liszt play Chopin's own études.

After the intermission, Mr. Wild returned to play *Après une lecture du Dante*, the concluding piece in Liszt's second book of the *Années de pelèrinage*. Along with the B-minor Sonata, *Après une lecture* comprises some of the weightiest and most wrenching of Lizst's music. Like the *Andante Spianato*, *Après une lecture* shows the duality of its composer's nature with its luxuriously sensual tritonal evocation of Hell (the *diabolus in musica*), contrasted with a second *Andante* subject in the transforming key of F-sharp major. Liszt's biographer, Alan Walker, shows how these themes are, in fact, derived from each other, and Mr. Wild's tumultuous interpretation gave full rein to the "strange tongues, horrible cries, words of pain, tones of anger" that Dante describes in the *Inferno*.

Paul Pabst is so far out of fashion that he is not even featured in the otherwise groaningly complete *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Pabst wrote transcriptions of a number of Tchaikovsky pieces—his *Eugene Onegin* paraphrase is still exhumed from time to time. By all accounts, Pabst, once described by a colleague as a "huge, heavy Teutonic, with the face of a bulldog," was possessed of both astonishing technique and considerable sweetness of character. Both of these qualities were abundantly present in the *Paraphrase on Sleeping Beauty* with which Mr. Wild ended his recital.

Sleeping Beauty is very witty: its primary theme is tucked away, appearing after an involved, often contrapuntal, introduction. When it finally does bloom, it does so softly; but after development, redevelopment, permutation, and restatement, it and the other subjects of the fantasy reappear in a gigantic bouquet of sound to finish the piece. On hearing *Sleeping Beauty* (and numerous other resurrected works that have been given their due by Mr. Wild during his career), one finds it difficult to comprehend the rationale of critical puritans who dismiss

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these pieces outright, or put them on life-support as "camp."

In his role as musical Rhadamanthus, Robert Schumann tempted fate by remarking that playing the piano with the left hand alone was "not as bad as if someone had wanted to study dancing with one foot, but it always remains funny and somewhat foolish." Schumann himself would suffer a debilitating injury to his right hand (overpractice, a dangerously ineffective training device, and syphilis have all been blamed). Fate was apparently not satisfied with just one disaster. In 1877, twenty-one years after his death, Schumann's wife, Clara, herself a great virtuoso, damaged her right hand while pulling out a drawer. Clara's inconvenience, however, was reduced somewhat when Johannes Brahms presented her with his magnificent adaptation of the *Chaconne* from J. S. Bach's D-minor Partita for unaccompanied violin.

While not the exclusive source for the left-hand repertoire, human calamity, especially of the epochal variety, has contributed generously. Paul Wittgenstein and Otakar Hollman were both cruelly injured during the First World War and both were able to continue concert careers by commissioning works for the remaining (left) hand from Richard Strauss, Britten, Martinů, Janàček, and Ravel, among others. Smaller-scale disasters prompted compositions by or on behalf of Zichy (hunting accident), Blumenthal (stroke), and Scriabin (tendovaginitis). While the estate of the left hand is not entirely tainted by misfortune—Godowski, Alkan, Moszkowski, and numerous others wrote works of considerable musical interest without grisly inspiration—few such works appeared in Leon Fleisher's recital, his first in New York in thirty years. His program was divided into five parts, each featuring at least two compositions with a stylistic or emotional commonality or contrast.

Mr. Fleisher started with works by Jenö Takács and the American composer Leon Kirchner. Takács' *Toccata und fuga* was written in the early Fifties, though apparently not published until some years later. A dramatic, attractively written piece, this rather Oriental-sounding work found its element in Mr. Fleisher's highly articulate and carefully enunciated reading. Leon Kirchner's recently composed *Piece for Left Hand* was also impressive, moving from a restless beginning to a poignantly colored close. Fiercely difficult, the work was reminiscent of the remote but compelling sonorities of Ronald Stevenson.

Camille Saint-Saëns's suite of six études for left hand was written when his duet partner, Caroline Remaury-Montigny (for whom he also wrote his *Wedding Cake Caprice* on a happier occasion), was obliged to undergo surgery on her right hand. By the time the études were completed in 1912, Saint-Saëns's compositional style had evolved into more linear—if not actually monodic—forms. Mr. Fleisher's spicy intonation and diamond-sharp pedalling, especially in the *Bourée* and *Moto Perpetuo*, as well as the sight of the left thumb picking out the melody to the dancing accompaniment of the other fingers, were a delight to both eye and ear.

Mr. Fleisher's programmatic pairings all showed a fine sense of balance, but the heavyweight coupling of the evening was the *Chacony* by the contemporary British composer Robert Saxton with Brahms's adaptation of the Bach *Chaconne*. While the audience had not heard the newer work, its unfamiliar patterns quickly dispersed under Mr. Fleisher's virtuosity. Especially effective in the *Chacony* was the textural contrast offered by the washes of pianissimo scales against startling, trumpet-like cadences. Mr. Fleisher sustained and linked the conclusion of *Chacony* to the start of the *Chaconne*, giving the clear impression (reinforced by a steely gaze at the audience) that the two works were to be considered a diptych.

Judging from his performance, the *Chaconne* has considerable hold on Mr. Fleisher, who gave this seventeen-minute distillation of a lifetime of emotions a most ardent performance. While Brahms was a meticulous

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transcriber, his style can be occasionally heard in the work; and Mr. Fleisher revelled in this somewhat different duality, as did his audience.

After the rarely heard *Sonatine for the Left Hand* by Dinu Lipatti and the moody *Silk Water* by Jean Hasse (the third première of the evening), Mr. Fleisher concluded his scheduled program with Felix Blumenfeld's *Etude in A-flat Major* and the harrowingly difficult Godowsky transcription of the "Schatz-Walzer" from Johann Strauss's *Der Zigeunerbaron*. These were pieces that had something for everyone, even the deaf: Mr. Fleisher plays from score and it was memorable to see the pianist's left hand in a pink blur over the keyboard, while the right hand langorously rose up from his lap to turn the page.

From the time that Clara Schumann escalated the aesthetic differences between her late husband and Liszt into something approaching an artistic *jihad*, musicians and their audiences have been divided into loyalists (Chopin, Schumann, Brahms, and that ilk) and futurists (Liszt, Wagner, and their followers). These days, the schism is more of academic than purely musical interest, for, as was evident at the two recitals under review, people continue to draw pleasure from each of these factions, and others besides.

To this end, the success of any performance implies an artistic understanding of—if not an affinity between—the composer and his interpreter. As such, the interpretation can be as important as the score—a masterpiece can be rendered impotent, or a less imposing work respectable. Messrs. Wild and Fleisher have each transcended styles, periods, fashions, and, in Mr. Fleisher's case, even physical misfortune in pursuit of their particular understandings and affinities. While some believe as an article of faith that Beethoven and Pabst, Brahms and Godowsky are the alphas and omegas of music, hearing performances such as these should undermine the certitude of that belief.

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The media

Smoke gets in your eyes

by James Bowman

During the relaxing, post-Christmas period, I like to declare a holiday from newspaper reading. For a week, at least, I may taste the luxury known by those who manage to live without exposing themselves to "the news." But this December, as I allowed myself idly to page through a copy of the London *Sunday Times*, I came across one of the most delightful stories of the year. On page three of the front section was the headline: "Revealed: the Elvis Presley killer diet." It claimed that the King's favorite, "Fool's Gold" sandwich—a foot-long baguette filled with bacon, peanut butter, and strawberry jam—contained 42,000 calories—and that he ate two of them a day, besides his two other large meals. There was even a helpful little bar graph comparing the daily caloric intake of an office worker, an active young man, a polar explorer, an Asian elephant, and Elvis. Elvis consumed more calories per day than all the others put together.

Now, although it was written by the paper's arts correspondent, that was my kind of health story. It had everything—except, perhaps, a claim that the recipe had been given to him by aliens. It informed and entertained and so accomplished the main purpose of good journalism, which is what, after all, we turn to the "quality" papers for. Yet in America, such a story would have been relegated to the supermarket tabloids. The health stories run by the mainstream press here tend to be about nerdy researchers, moonlighting as moralists, who have discovered something new that is not good for us. Or, more rarely, something that *is* good for us. The latest is that a little booze every day—even the hard stuff, which used to be considered poison—can be good for your heart. And pizza, guys, if consumed in sufficient quantities, can be a prophylactic against prostate cancer.

The news is getting better! But, generally speaking, the field is still a playground for those smug moralists and Puritans who share with journalists an invincible self-righteousness and a fondness for preaching. One result is that there is a tendency for health stories to become media stories. Of course, in America, everything is more or less a media story, since the growth of postmodern journalism has taught us that whatever reporters report on can be made more sexy with news of how the reporting was done, or how the reporter felt about it. But some stories are so morally charged that they all but cry out for such treatment, and chief among them are tobacco stories. Here is one subject where the moralists are almost unchallenged, except for the timid protests of a few civil libertarians. Smoking has a special place in the eyes of the new media because of the extra moral duty shouldered by all who write or speak of it to bear witness to its evil.

Even when they themselves resist the temptation to moralize, reporters on the smoking-and-health beat tend to regard

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their own importance and that of their researches as being of Himalayan proportions. In the week after I went glumly back to my newspapers, I opened up *The Washington Post* to find an admirably balanced and judicious piece of roughly 8,000 words by Benjamin Weiser on how it happened (and why it need not have happened) that ABC apologized to Philip Morris and paid the company's $15 million in legal fees for having erroneously reported that it spiked its cigarettes with nicotine "from outside sources" in order to keep smokers hooked. Who on earth would want to read such a story? Its intrinsic worth would seem to be that of a paragraph under "Legal News," yet here it was being treated as if it were *Brown* v. *Board of Education*—or, perhaps, an invasion of China.

Weiser concluded that, in the words of an anonymous ABC executive, the network "had a terrific story and they pressed it one step too far." But this "one step" was not inadvertent. In order to use as much of the tobacco leaf as possible, tobacco companies take the otherwise unusable stems, stalks, and trimmings, soak them in water to soften them and then roll them out into paperlike sheets which can be combined with natural tobacco leaves. Because the soaking removes the nicotine from the reconstituted tobacco and because nicotine is what cigarette smokers want, that which is removed is put back at a later stage of the production process. It is this which ABC's "Day One," in a broadcast in 1994, insisted was tantamount to "spiking" or "boosting" the cigarettes with extra nicotine—a charge so serious in the eyes of the Food and Drug Administration that it seemed a prima facie cause for reclassifying nicotine as a drug. Moreover, "Day One" mistakenly reported that the manufacturers commonly buy nicotine extract from outside suppliers to add this extra kick.

So much is not in dispute and would seem to have provided not just Philip Morris but all the cigarette makers with grounds for a libel action. But ABC's settlement—aggravated, as it seems, by Philip Morris's purchase of some seven hundred full-page newspaper advertisements to publish the network's carefully worded letter of apology—created a journalistic uproar. Weiser's was far from the first lengthy rehash of the story. Equally exhaustive treatments of it had already appeared in both the *American Journalism Review* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*—to say nothing of shorter pieces and angry editorials in a host of other publications when the news broke last August. And the story got a new lease on life in November with the decision by CBS, fearful of another legal action, to withdraw an interview on "60 Minutes" with Jeffrey Wigand, a disgruntled tobacco company executive who promised to produce scandalous, if not incriminating, revelations. Already both the *AJR* and the *CJR* have done major investigations of *this* story too.

As has *The Washington Post*, whose media reporter, Howard Kurtz, asked in the "Style" section before Christmas: "Is '60 Minutes' Still Ticking?" Kurtz was interested not only in CBS's putative poltroonery in failing to face down the tobacco men, but because the incident led to some dissension in the ranks at "60 Minutes." Mike Wallace, the interviewer of Wigand, had adopted on the air a pose self-righteous even by his standards and had let it be known that he was strongly opposed to, but powerless against, the advice of the network's lawyers. He neglected to mention to some of his colleagues, however, that Wigand had been paid a $12,000 consulting fee (on a different show) by CBS and that he had been indemnified by the network against legal action taken by his former employer Brown & Williamson, with whom he had signed a confidentiality agreement. Under the circumstances, the lawyers had a point about the rather frightening extent of the network's potential liability. Morley Safer, for one, felt that he had been left "twisting slowly in the wind" when he had publicly joined in Wallace's criticism of the network in ignorance of these circumstances.

Kurtz's story quotes "a former employee"

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of the show as calling it "a dysfunctional family" because of the recriminations which broke out over the cancelled Wigand interview. Hilariously, Don Hewitt, the executive producer claims to Kurtz the excuse of naïveté: "I think we do what we do better than anybody. What we don't know how to do is be spin doctors and lawyers. We were playing a game we knew nothing about." Wallace, too, pretends to be a plain, blunt man, unsophisticated but honest, when he asks Kurtz: "Can a company that is poisoning people, killing people, hide what they do behind a confidentiality agreement at the same time that people are dying from what they do?" It is to Kurtz's credit that he adds: "In the office next door, Safer, lighting up his fifth Rothman's of the morning, has a sharply different view of the dispute."

Safer's view is that "We should not be inviting *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* or anyone else into our newsroom and our process. The chicken-[expletive] that goes on in any newsroom, it's gossip. Personalities within this shop have become the subject of journalists-turned-gossip columnists." Kurtz also notes the irony of this prescription for stonewalling from one of those who had been so indignant about the secretiveness of Brown & Williamson. But he is hardly being critical when he notes that "Don Hewitt pleads guilty to being stuck in the past":

> "Everything in America looks different," he says. "The buses look different. The gas stations look different. The banks look different. The only thing in America that looks the same as it did when you were a kid is '60 Minutes.' I think that's a plus. It's like when you go to grandpa's house and the screen door still squeaks.
>
> "If anybody thinks we couldn't have done Joey Buttafuoco, Heidi Fleiss, Kato Kaelin, O. J.'s mother, they were all out there. I had no interest in Lorena Bobbitt cutting off her husband's [penis]. I just felt we had more important fish to fry."

Part of the reason for the widespread indignation about these tobacco stories among the self-congratulatory "media professionals" is such romantic notions about the past when people, it is supposed, were not so interested in sleazy stories and corporations weren't so committed to "the bottom line."

It's all a myth, of course. It was back in the 1880s when Frank Harris discovered that the secret of making the London *Evening News* a success was to think like a fourteen-year-old (now it would have to be ten). "My obsessions then were kissing and fighting," he wrote, neglecting to mention that they were so long afterwards, too: "when I got one or other or both of these interests into every column, the circulation of the paper increased steadily." In fact, our unhealthy interest in salacious sex and crime stories is really just a sort of down-market version of the highbrow's Puritanical eagerness to spy into abuses by outwardly respectable "merchants of death" (as they used to call the arms industry in the good old days). But the sins of the latter are of relatively little interest outside "the media."

That is why their activities are such a staple of the likes of the *American Journalism Review* and the *Columbia Journalism Review*. These journals, infallible gauges of what stories journalists think are important, would have been unnecessary when there was less divergence on this subject between journalists and the ordinary consumers of journalism. But now tobacco has become as important to them as it is to the more popular glossy magazines: to some it supplies revenue; to others, moral indignation. The *CJR*, in fact, ran successive cover stories on the ABC/Philip Morris and the CBS/Brown & Williamson affairs. The subtext of both, as of most of the serious treatments of the subject is the shame of yielding to the tobacco companies, even on issues of justice or fairness, and the greed if not corruption in the networks' boardrooms which such yielding betokens. It is a journalistic point of honor to brook no qualification of the judgment that tobacco

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merchants are hardly better than wanton killers.

For example, in yet another discussion of the evils of tobacco (this time featuring tobacco advertising) a couple of years ago, the *AJR* quoted with approval the words of H. Mason Sizemore, proprietor of the *Seattle Times*, who had just banned cigarette advertisements from his paper: "These ads were designed to kill our readers, so we decided to refuse them." If the tobacco company executives had said anything so obviously inaccurate about themselves, the journalistic professionals would unquestionably have pointed it out. *AJR* uses the executives' suppositious intention to kill as its pull quote. Nor is this semi-hysterical attitude towards the manufacturers of a legal product limited to the professional journals. A. M. Rosenthal of *The New York Times* was one of many who excoriated "60 Minutes" for yielding to illegitimate and "disgusting" pressures from big business trying to silence the program.

To Rosenthal, although he was writing before all the circumstances of the Wigand interview became known, there was a readiness to assume that the moral issue was simplicity itself: the press were the good guys and the tobacco companies were the bad guys. Bad guys claiming their rights under, say, the laws of libel or of contract are just trying to cover up their badness. They should have no rights, at least in the view of the press, which apparently sees no issue in equity why the law should restrain it from publishing anything discreditable about them. Rosenthal writes,

> Perhaps there was risk, under legal interpretations in some states. But taking risks for an important cause is part of being in the news business, a payback for the First Amendment. If other news companies bow to having their mouths zippered by business, without fighting to the Supreme Court, any worried manufacturer, from chemicals to baby rattles, will demand that every employee sign gag contracts. Farewell to vital consumer information that business prefers to keep quiet.

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And this is his cue to refer to the glorious saga of *The New York Times*'s publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, when it said damn the lawyers, full speed ahead.

> The Times publishing management overrode those lawyers and stood with the news staff. Management and news people recognized that the question was not how could we publish that treasury of confidential documents on the conduct of the Vietnam War, but how could we not.
>
> It was a risk, but not as big as that taken by correspondents sent to battles, then and now, by the Times, or by CBS.

What lies behind this kind of crude and false moralism, which equates those who criticize tobacco companies with those who risk their lives in battle, is another kind of moral simplicity. One of the favorite incidents in the recent tobacco wars for the media moralists is the occasion when the heads of the major tobacco companies all stood up before a congressional committee and swore, one after the other, that nicotine was not addictive. The video footage was in the edited "60 Minutes" segment and was commended by Walter Goodman, also in *The New York Times*, as "the most pleasurable moments" of the show. This is cited again and again as evidence of these gentlemen's corruption and mendacity, but of course the law, which the press thinks does not hound them enough, requires them to lie or face ruinous liabilities for knowingly purveying harmful substances. Yet Goodman and his like go on citing the incident as if it were immensely significant of the evil they love to denounce, here compounded by the evil of hypocrisy.

In Goodman's view a journalist's legal liability is simply an excuse for the tobacco executives, "rich and ruthless purveyors of a product that can kill," to attack those in the press whose claim to propriety of the public good is unproblematical. The specter of the law simply means "that journalists, in deference to their employers and their own careers, will take fewer chances, pick softer subjects, treat them less forcefully and even hold back evidence from other reporters" as the producer of "60 Minutes," Don Hewitt, did to him when he refused to show him a tape of the offending interview.

> To their credit, Mr. Hewitt and Mr. [Mike] Wallace both acknowledged that they had weakened their program by bowing to their masters, and Mr. Wallace promised in his self-serving apologia at the end of Sunday's program that, trust him, it would not happen again. One must cry Amen, but producers and reporters do not exert much influence in network boardrooms these days, and decisions on whether to take a risk are more likely to be made by risk-averse lawyers and higher-ups. . . . There is no reason for confidence that big-money pressures will not prevail from time to time, as overly cautious journalists, accustomed to following the lead of "60 Minutes," fold even before being threatened.

Here is a man whose own "masters" are presumably to be tolerated only so long as they let him do whatever he thinks in the public interest; here is a man, in other words, who would have no masters, no constraints on journalists. In his ideal world, the journalists are the masters. Talk about "self-serving"!

The larger issue here includes the government's attempts effectively to prevent the tobacco companies from doing *any* research, or even from saying honestly what they think. For if their research reveals harmful effects of cigarette smoke or noncommercial means of mitigating them, then they have either to make themselves criminally liable by suppressing it or to put themselves out of business. Either way, a government determined to ruin them without the necessity of passing any new laws may do so while the media looks on and cheers. Likewise, the press—in this case *The Wall Street Journal*—rushed to publish in December an internal memo written by someone at Philip Morris which stated that "Different people smoke for different reasons, but the primary reason is to deliver

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nicotine into their bodies." You or I might think that a fairly unremarkable statement, but the *Journal* and the Food and Drug Administration licked their chops at what they saw as an implied admission that the company was in the drug delivery business and therefore subject to regulation by the agency.

Moreover, said *The New York Times*,

> the disclosure of the memorandum was welcomed by lawyers who have been suing Philip Morris and other tobacco companies on behalf of smokers or people who contend they were harmed by smokers around them. The lawyers said it would strengthen their cases by reinforcing earlier industry documents that reached similar conclusions.

Coyly, the article's author, Barnaby J. Feder, notes that "Tobacco companies are leery of any statement implying that nicotine is even mildly addictive because it would only strengthen the Food and Drug Administration's argument for controlling their products. But nicotine experts outside the tobacco companies say that a refusal to concede that nicotine is addictive is a litigation strategy, not a scientifically defensible stand." Well, duh. But where does this "strategy" come from? It is simply the last resort of the companies confronted with determined government harassment in the attempt to meet a demand which the government hasn't the nerve to outlaw in the way that it does the demand for other drugs. Forced to lie about what everybody knows regarding the harmful and addictive properties of tobacco, the executives then have hypocrisy added to their charge sheet.

Nor is their persecution a strictly nationalized affair. According to Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., of *The Wall Street Journal*, not only are six states suing the tobacco companies in order to recover the costs of treating smoking-related illnesses, but "the piranhas of the plaintiff's bar have been schooling in unprecedented fashion" in order to get a piece of the potentially huge class-action payout to as many as ninety million Americans who have been told by their doctors to quit smoking:

> In the past, juries have usually sided with the industry, holding smokers liable for the damage they inflict on themselves. The class-action lawyers seem intent on arguing that the industry, by failing to disclose everything it knew or believed about smoking, was putting one over on its customers. The corollary is that acquiring an addiction is tantamount to relieving oneself of personal responsibility. . . . As for the recent flutter of leaked memos, they prove only that the cigarette industry isn't as dumb as nobody thought it was. If the tobacco industry dissembles and nobody is fooled, is there liability?

It's all a ludicrous game, and Jenkins is too generous to the Puritans when he says that it is characterized by "almost an equal disingenuousness" on both sides. But their hounding of the tobacco merchants probably affords us almost as much entertainment as the saga of Elvis's superpachydermatous eating habits did jaded, Christmastime Britain—where at least they don't pretend their sport is morally elevating.

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Books

The body politic

by Richard Selzer

There is much to enjoy in Gerald Weissmann's new collection of essays.[1] As readers of his previous books know well, this is a man conversant with lore in many areas—medicine, science, art, and history among them. Few are the doctor-writers who can draw the reader into a story with so sure a hand. He does this here in his account of the "Saturnine Gout," that affliction of Englishmen in the eighteenth century. It seems that the British Foreign Minister of that time, objecting to the importation of so much French wine, arranged with the Portuguese to buy theirs instead. But the Portuguese wine was "fortified" with whiskey that had been aged in lead-lined containers. What the Minister had done was to poison a vast number of middle- and upper-class English gentlemen, giving them red noses, inflamed joints, all the stigmata of gout immortalized in the pictures of Rowlandson and Hogarth. The English poor who drank gin and beer were not so afflicted. "Saturnine," because lead was the sign of Saturn, the farthest and most morose of the planets.

Riveting, too, is Dr. Weissmann's account of the creation of New York's Central Park under the guidance of the abolitionist and sanitarian Frederick Law Olmsted, a man for whom morality and hygiene were linked. Central Park was Olmsted's answer to the cholera epidemics of 1848. It was deemed necessary to give the city "a cleaning as it had not had in years" and to provide a free space where fresh air might be breathed. In another chapter, the author takes you along on a canoe trip to the virgin lakes and mountains of the Adirondacks. Your companions are none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, John Holmes (Oliver Wendell's brother), and Louis Agassiz, the country's major natural philosopher (and scientific rascal). These Boston nabobs "swept with oars the Saranac" and endured "hard fare, hard bed and comic misery—the midge, the blue-fly and mosquito" even as they "trode on air." Most moving is the account of the heroism of such as Robert Gould Shaw and Thomas Wentworth Higginson in their leadership of the black regiments that did so much to turn the tide of battle in the Civil War.

The conceit at the heart of this book is that social reform is the sister of scientific medical progress. The most splendid deed of the late twentieth century, the "Flowering of DNA" (to paraphrase Van Wyck Brooks's reference to New England) had its roots in meliorist soil. Meliorism is the term invented by George Eliot that signifies progress through reason, not sentiment. The meliorist sees what society needs and acts to produce it. "An altruist feeds the beggar; a meliorist feeds the beggar and vaccinates his children." Meliorism is the spirit that unites

1 *Democracy and DNA: American Dreams and Medical Progress*, by Gerald Weissmann; Hill & Wang, 263 pages, $23.

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the age of abolition with the age of DNA, or so the author would have it. The city of Boston is seen as the hub of both social reform and medical progress before the Civil War. It is personified in Oliver Wendell Holmes, physician and literary figure. An intrepid band of Bostonians is enlisted to advance the thesis of *Democracy and DNA*, among them Emerson, James Russell Lowell, William James, Margaret Fuller, and Katherine Lee Bates. Katherine Lee Bates? One of the most entertaining chapters is devoted to this professor of English at Wellesley, who, after visiting Pike's Peak in Colorado, wrote the words to "America the Beautiful." Her zeal for social reform and equality for women was shared by her lover and colleague at Wellesley, Katherine Coman. It is a sign of our times that many readers will take satisfaction in the news that so many of the great women who figure in this book were lesbians—Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House; Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman medical graduate; and Alice James, the gifted sister of Henry and William. (One wonders whether, even today, patriotism would be stifled by bigotry if those who sing "America the Beautiful" were aware of who had written it.) As for Alice James, she spent years as an invalid afflicted with an incapacitating hysteria until her death of breast cancer. Dr. Weissmann sees her powerful and moving memoir not as the brilliant work of art it is and worthy of her family name but as the case history of a patient searching for a doctor who would listen to her "while the longing pallid victim stretches out a sickly tendril," as Alice James put it herself.

When the author attaches the same diagnoses of depression and invalidism to Emily Dickinson, he miscalculates seriously. In a lapse of taste as well as judgement, he contrasts Dickinson with Walt Whitman: " 'I hear America singing,' chants Walt Whitman. 'I hear America sobbing,' sighs Emily Dickinson.' " Such a reduction of the great poet springs from an egregious cleverness. Emily Dickinson was no more a patient than any of the rest of us are. Nor were her poems a reaching out by a poet in pain. She wrote about death as a fate not to be denied but to be faced as both an old adversary and a friend. She was a strong, determined artist who knew her own worth. "I taste a liquor never brewed/ From Tankards scooped in Pearl./ Not all the Vats along the Rhine/ Yield such an Alcohol." It is nonsense to insist that Dickinson's poetry "has about it the sounds of a patient carefully arranging her symptoms." Dr. Weissmann's misreading was matched by that of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the same who led the black regiments to such good effect and became a minister and editor at *The Atlantic Monthly*. Dickinson had been led to seek out Higginson after reading his "Letter to a Young Contributor" in the *Atlantic* in which he gave advice to those who would submit their work. Dr. Weissmann gives the editor full credit for "discovering" Dickinson. "Were it not for Higginson, . . . Dickinson might have remained . . . voiceless." In fact, she sent six poems to the baffled Higginson who was incapable of recognizing Dickinson's radical new art. Shocked by her experimental creations, he proceeded to mutilate them in the name of editing; he then published them in their bastardized form. Understandably, the poet sent him no more except for a gentle admonition in the form of a merry, bardic poem full of music and minstrelsy:

> I cannot dance upon my Toes—
> No Man instructed me—
> But oftentimes, among my mind,
> A Glee possesses me—
>
> That had I Ballet knowledge—
> Would put itself abroad
> In Pirouette to blanch a Troupe
> Or lay a Prima mad.

Not the least of the pleasures of reading this book is the implicit invitation to debate the author. It is no easy thing, however, to pin Dr. Weissmann down long enough to

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get a firm hold. He is adept at espousing both sides of a question. Just when you're sure he's given evidence to support one notion, you are given equal evidence to suggest otherwise. It rather precludes debate as that term is usually understood. But let me try. The impression is conveyed that the "Flowering of New England" and the "Biological Revolution" constituted a renaissance of some kind, that there was a creative ferment in the air shared by science, literature, and culture. Edgar Allan Poe is brought forth as a link between the two by virtue of his having invented the mystery-story genre and thereby encouraging the use of conjecture in the taking of a patient's history. One might as well say that Einstein was immediately preceded by the Russian ballet. Oliver Wendell Holmes went to Paris to study medicine. So did Elizabeth Blackwell and a great many other Americans. It scarcely needs pointing out that it was the Paris of Charcot, that Barnum of the mental wards, and the vogue of neurasthenia. DNA and abolition? It would be equally easy to manufacture a causality between war and medical progress. It is at least as convincing that an aversion toward death is the engine that drove, and still drives, medical research. We hate death and so we have learned how to subdue the immune system and transplant organs in order to avoid it. And who would deny that money is a goad to science? Personal and corporate gain have brought about the development of new drugs and ingenious instruments. And where is it written that the medical scientist must be of good heart? It is precisely the disinterestedness of the scientist that makes his research glorious. He is not motivated by good or evil. He is driven by the need to know; it is a sublime curiosity that is all too often corrupted by the lust for fame and fortune, as the notorious skirmishing between laboratories will attest.

Gerald Weissmann is the quintessential scientific humanist who scoffs at anything that cannot be replicated in the laboratory, such as the miracles of God. He finds it refreshing that the sole purpose of DNA is to copy itself. We are not, he muses, "a little lower than the angels, but a little sloppier than a virus." Absolved of the need to divine the motive of its maker, "we can begin to tinker with our DNA, to meliorate its errors in the dish." This comes as no surprise. Science is devoid of sacrament, and rightly so. But it is in the nature of man to cling to the sacramental lest he become estranged from society.

Dr. Weissmann is also a punster who does not shrink to place this writerly sin in service of an elitism that some might find unappealing. On TV there is "the cackle of shysters or bleat of strumpets." About the singer Madonna's leather and metal costumes, it is "difficult to tell the singer from the thong." The clock that sets the time to copy DNA was figured out in quahogs, and so, naturally, "we are such stuff as clams are made of." That sort of thing. Much of the book is written in a tub-thumping prose that serves to weaken rather than bolster his case. What the human genome will predict will not always be good news. "The facts of life, just the facts, ma'am, will make few of us happy. We tend to prefer the fancy music of hope to the plain speech of fact." Contrasting the nineteenth-century poet with the twentieth-century scientist, Weissmann becomes Jeremiah. "As our violent century sputters to the millennium, as gun-toting tots spill out of schoolyards to the amplified doggerel of misogynist war chants, belief in the Romantic equation of ethics and aesthetics seems like geriatric nostalgia." The lipfoam sprays on the other arts as well: ". . . our cacophonous avant-garde is no more encouraging than our low life. The post-modernist high jinks of our time ought to make anyone nostalgic for a golden age of poems that rhyme, paintings with figures in them, and operas with tunes to sing." Even reading such paragraphs is exhausting. Where was the editor to save the well-intentioned author from his own excesses?

The last chapter of the book focuses on Lewis Thomas as the embodiment of medicine and humanism, and on Bellevue Med-

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ical Center as the beating heart of the whole marvelous enterprise of medical science. We are in attendance at the first Lewis Thomas Award Ceremony. Thomas himself is to be the recipient. One of his daughters reads a passage from one of her father's books that tells of her grandfather's late-night house calls as a general practitioner. As she herself is about to publish a volume of short stories, we are reminded of the familial bond between literature and medicine. Oscar Wilde was the child of a doctor, writes Weissmann, as were Sinclair Lewis, Proust, Flaubert, Auden, and Gerald Weissmann. Another daughter plays Mozart on the piano, which the author also relates to nighttime house calls and a doctor's black bag. As for the distinguished audience, "some of these might pass for temporal saints who had fulfilled the dreams of sanitarians and reformers, able to accomplish God's work on earth. Unlike those of the deity, however, the miracles of medical science are reproducible." Then it is Bellevue's turn, where both Lewis Thomas and Gerald Weissmann worked. It is portrayed as "the home of star-eyed Science." Reading on, we find ourselves in Valhalla with the clouds piled up high on either side. One can conjecture on the wry amusement with which such institutional chauvinism will be met.

The struggle between Art and Science, between the Virgin and the Dynamo, will not end with this book. Perhaps they are incompatible. Metaphor and imagery, while desirable for the artist, are anathema for the scientist. The artist explores a myth-haunted cave; the scientist stands atop the crystal pyramid of intelligence. If the scientists are the hunters, artists are the shamans; we need them both. For the scientist, the past is something to be moved on from; the artist is given to backward glances. The mark of Science is progress; in Art, there is no such thing as progress. The cave paintings of prehistory are just as "up-to-date" as the work of Picasso. Were I to draw any connection between the advances of science and any other influence, it would be to consider Yeats's Great Memory, the "foundation of nearly all magical practices." Everyone partakes of the Great Memory but only a few have the gift to evoke it by symbol, language, dance, painting, or scientific research. In Joseph Campbell's example, the newborn chick reacts with fear to the shadow of a hawk; it is equipped with a biological nervous mechanism that enables it to respond to a circumstance never before experienced. The image of the hereditary enemy is already sleeping in the new chicken. In man, too, there is a whole body of vestigial biological images that can be awakened equally by art and science. Whatever satisfaction Science may take in the proceeds of its ingenuity, it would be well to remember that some mysteries are not meant to be solved; they are meant to be deepened.

Canned laughs

George Plimpton, editor
The Paris Review, no. 136 (Fall 1995).
294 pages, $10

reviewed by Mark Steyn

As the old joke goes, *The Paris Review* on humor is no laughing matter. Ninety-seven pages into its special issue, "Whither Mirth?," Jeffrey Eugenides decides to posit a ribtickler:

> Humor is always generated by the leap from a premise to a logical but unseen conclusion. It works according to the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-thesis dialectic. For example, take the vaudeville joke (reprised by Buddy Glass): First comedian: "I just spent two weeks in bed with an acute hepatitis." Second comedian: "You lucky stiff! Which one? They're both cute, those Hepatitis girls." Here the thesis is hepatitis, a disease. The antithesis is the Hepatitis girls, two people. The final thesis—the humor—comes with the recognition of the unseen connection between these two dissimilar items.

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The thesis is sounder than the joke. For the pun to work, the first comedian has to say, "I just spent two weeks in bed with acute hepatitis"—not "*an* acute hepatitis." But, somewhere between Jeffrey's pen and the printed text, that indefinite article has been inserted and the entire humorological foundation of the joke has collapsed. Of course, you could hastily improvise a rescue plan and make the two sisters Anna Cute-Hepatitis and Dolores Cute-Hepatitis, but, in vaudeville at any rate, I think you'd find you'd been given the hook by now and replaced by Otto the Wonder Poodle.

Happily, the world of letters is far less demanding. Humor is an act of precise but lightly-worn compression; analysis of humor tends to woolly but heavily-worn prolixity. The extraneous indefinite article in Eugenides's joke is a whimsical *reductio* of *The Paris Review*'s endeavors: taken as a whole, the entire issue is a *very* indefinite article. You get to the end, and you wonder where the punch line was.

A joke has a kind of formal purity—so that, even if you don't find it funny, you can respect its structural integrity. Here's Weber and Fields in New York a hundred years ago:

> Who was that lady I saw you with last night?
> That was no lady, that was my wife.

I like its portability. A year or two back, the British magazine *Private Eye* showed two gangsta rappers chillin' in the 'hood:

> Who was that 'ho I saw you with last night?
> That was no 'ho, that was my bitch.

A century on from the original, you can see the difficulties the joke has run into. You couldn't tell the updated version on network TV or in *The New York Times* without explaining that you personally didn't regard women as 'hoes and bitches, but, equally, you weren't implying that all African-American men were sexist braggarts. In the favored cliché of the society gossip columns, we "share a joke." And, at a time when we share less and less, why should jokes be the exception to the rule? Hyphenation, the great evil of the age, extends to humor as much as anything else. Even the most cursory glance at the Op-Ed pages of our major newspapers makes plain the compartmentalization: here's the African-American columnist on the Million Man March; here's the Jewish-American on Israeli-Syrian peace talks; here's the Latino-American on welfare payments to illegal immigrants; here's the gay-American on government cutbacks in AIDS research; and, down at the foot of the page, here's the Humorist-American on . . . electronic barcode scanners at the supermarket, or why men never change toilet rolls, or how come those sachets they give you on planes are designed to catapult the salad dressing over the guy sitting next to you. Because, after the heavyweights have claimed the Million Man March and the Middle East and welfare and AIDS, what's left?

"Humor has to surprise us, otherwise it isn't funny," Garrison Keillor tells George Plimpton. "It's a death knell for a writer to be labeled a humorist because then it's not a surprise anymore." Worse, the very label shrinks your comedic license. "Humor is not about airline luggage or foreign taxicab drivers," Keillor insists. I agree. But we shouldn't deduce from that that he altogether disdains glib recognition-humor. "When I am funny," he continues, no doubt to knowing chortles from his audience of *Paris Review* readers, "I hope to be funny about Republicans, not about Pakistani taxi drivers." Which goes to show that easy laughs are mostly a matter of taste.

That's the funny thing—maybe *the* funny thing—about *The Paris Review*. Although Plimpton has titled his "humor issue" "Whither Mirth?," the "whither?" remains unwrung, the tone complacently nostalgic. The three big interviews grandly headed "The Art of Humor I, II & III" accurately convey the timidity of the enterprise: Calvin Trillin is best known for his small-town chronicles in *The New Yorker*, Keillor is

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holed up in Lake Wobegon, and Woody Allen spends his time, as he once said, "Looking for Cole Porter's New York"—or anyway a New York where, if it's not Porter on the soundtrack, it's Gershwin or Benny Goodman. These are insulated worlds. Nothing wrong with that: P. G. Wodehouse's world is an insulated one, and it's the most joyously comedic landscape in literature. But Plum's England and New York and Hollywood do far greater justice to the available range of socio-economic groups than Plimpton's trio does: as Spike Lee and others have noted, there are no blacks in Woody Allen's New York; there are no blacks or gays or Pakistani taxi drivers in Lake Wobegon. Again, nothing wrong with that. I'm just struck by the narrowness of *The Paris Review*'s humor horizons. *In yucko veritas*: we all know those sales execs who pay lip service to the company's nonsexist behavior codes but can't wait to start swapping stories about the chick with the big hooters. I wonder if Plimpton isn't offering us polite society's equivalent: the liberal, educated, NPR-listening middle classes—the ones who profess to be on the side of the Pakistani taxi drivers—can't wait to flee the multicultural, multisexual utopia they commend so enthusiastically and retreat to the uncomplicated world of small town certainties. At the end of "Whither Mirth?," *The Paris Review* does this literally, decamping for a symposium on the state of contemporary comedy to Menaggio, Italy. As battle-scarred British music hall veterans used to say, it's not exactly the Glasgow Empire on a Saturday night. The section is headed "Como Conversazione"—Como as in Lake, though Como as in Perry would be a more honest assessment of the state of contemporary comedy. Almost in inverse proportion to the escalating ugliness of every other sphere of American culture, humor has snuggled deeper and deeper into its cosy cardigan: rap, grunge, cyberporn, phone sex, daytime talk shows, natural born killers, homoerotic bullwhips and bodily fluids . . . and Dave Barry.

This isn't how comedy thinks of itself. There's a much-quoted story of the English actor on his deathbed being asked if dying is hard. He replies: "Dying is easy. Comedy is hard." That's the received wisdom. A couple of years back, at some terrible awards ceremony or other, Joan Collins was supplied with the anecdote as part of a prescripted link before handing over a prize for Best Comedy. She swaggered out on stage, gazed into the teleprompter, read all the preamble—the actor, the deathbed, etc.—then said: "He replied: 'Comedy is easy. Dying is hard.' "

There are two things to say about Miss Collins's misreading: (1) She still got a huge laugh. That's because she thought she was telling a joke and so she told it as a joke, and the audience was expecting to hear a joke and so heard it as a joke. Comedy uses forms and structures as a type of insurance. David Letterman's nightly "Top Ten" list is only the most obvious example: the countdown, the drum rolls are designed to cue laughter anyway; if the line is actually funny, it's merely a bonus. (2) Miss Collins's version is funnier. That's not because it's necessarily truer but because it's more subversive: it goes *against* received wisdom, which comedy is supposed to do but hardly ever manages—in this case, the received wisdom being the smug self-confidence with which comedians and writers and thespians deem their chosen livings as especially difficult.

Comedy is not hard, not now. Contemporary comedy may think of itself as directly descended from Lenny Bruce, but actually it's closer to "Ozzie and Harriet." Most comedy is pandering: it lets you know that you were right all along—about barcode scanners, salad dressing, Republicans. Its greatest weakness is that it's scared to tell you things you don't already agree with. For example, the contents page of *The Paris Review* lists something called "Yahoos," page 198. You turn to page 198 and you find a list of "members of the U.S. House of Representatives who recently voted for the

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Stearns amendment, which in essence intends to abolish government aid to the arts." And that's it: a list. "It may be the funniest contribution in the issue," giggles the editor. Well, yes, it may be. But it still isn't funny enough. As an example of the laxness of humor, it's hard to beat. Listing a bunch of Congressmen under the heading "Yahoos" doesn't tell you anything about plans "to abolish government aid to the arts," but it tells you everything about Plimpton's assumptions about his readership: like the airline luggage, it's the easy laugh, the recognition laugh, the laugh of the pandered to.

You have to be exceptionally strong-willed, careless, or downright perverse to throw that away. Personally, I find Garrison Keillor much more interesting when he starts in on one of his denunciations of Tina Brown and, for a moment, the measured Midwestern façade cracks a little as he trembles on the brink of a rant: here's something Mister Mellowtone gets steamed about, that he has a stake in. But then he remembers the time and effort he's invested in constructing the lovability of Garrison Keillor, and gets a grip. Everybody loves Lake Wobegon—except, in my experience, small-town townsfolk who resent New Yorkers driving through and going, "Gee, it's just like Lake Wobegon." But, when Keillor tackles a darker theme like male insecurity in *The Book of Guys*, the sense of an author who wants to say something yet who's scared to say anything is almost palpable. As it was, even the ever-so-slight hint that Garrison might not be quite so nice and nostalgic and quaintly irrelevant to all the unpleasantnesses of life as we all want him to be rattled some reviewers. When *Guys* came out, Keillor was on the road in Burlington, Vermont, and did some stories from the book for his adoring fans. "Did he do the one about Vermont?" I asked a friend. "What one about Vermont?" she said. I showed it to her: for Keillor, it's almost savage, mercilessly mocking the Green Mountain theme-park state, McDonald's Golden Arches on pre-aged wood shingles, the Ben & Jerry's school of caring capitalism—and all accompanied by an ongoing pledge drive for the very story as it's being told. It would have taken a small amount of guts to do that in Burlington before an audience of pledge-drive-crazy Vermont Public Radio reconstituted arts'n'croissants flatlanders. But it would have unsettled them, and Keillor is too in love with his lovability.

The cosiness is even eerier in the Woody Allen chapter, where not a mention is made of the man's recent difficulties. You sense the *Review* feels it would be in bad taste, and that bad taste has no place in humor. But the Fall of Woody is significant because it's the clearest example of how we've divorced comedy from life: like the *Times* Op-Ed page, we put a border round it and seal it off in the corner. For years, the guy made movies where he played a middle-aged lecher with the hots for young babes, and we all said what a likable schnook he was. When it turns out he's much the same in life, we're aghast—as we would be if Schwarzenegger passed his weekends gunning down anyone who got in his way. At his first press conference, he made the mistake of essaying a one-liner or two, and was promptly denounced in the media for the inadequacy, the inappropriateness of the response. Today, when comedy meets life, the laugh dies instantly. Somewhere along the way, we seem to have transformed the court jesters into the eunuchs in the harem.

From time to time in "Whither Mirth?," John Irving or Mordecai Richler will grumble about political correctness and the policing of humor, but the *Review*'s narrow selection and the bland, deferential interviewing of Allen and Keillor hint at its own difficulties with "non-approved" jokes. Over the years, Plimpton has never been one to shirk a challenge. Instead of letting him cuddle up to Keillor and Harold Bloom, why not toss him in with the "non-approved" boys, with Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh? Surely, as an assertion of comedic muscle, Limbaugh's example is in-

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spirational. It's the jokes that gave him the edge on his competition (to hear that Mario Cuomo regards his own fumbling talk-show as an answer to Limbaugh's is to marvel at liberalism's determination to misunderstand the reasons for his success): the jokes drew the audience, and he delivered the audience to the Republican Party. At the very least, he fulfills Keillor's definition of humor as surprise: pre-Rush, opening up the show, as Limbaugh did after the November '94 elections, by singing along to James Brown's funkadelic "I Feel Good" would not have fitted our definition of conservative behavior. "I'm sick of the old clichés," complained Sam Goldwyn. "Bring me some new clichés." That's what Limbaugh's done.

The trouble is the cliché pool keeps shriveling. A rich white man slipping on a banana skin is funny; a black pimp is too risky: you might get accused of making some offensive African-American/jungle primitive connection, like the department store Santa in New Jersey who greeted the little black boy, as he greeted the little white boys, with a playful "You little monkey!" and promptly found himself facing a massive Santa suit. In the *Review*'s "Birth of a Notion" section here, there's a long two-page account of how *Newsday*'s Doug Marlette came up with a cartoon on affirmative action—in the course of which it becomes clear that he regards cartooning as an affirmative action program in itself. Well, yes, it ought to be, but not in the way Marlette thinks. One of the cruelest things you can do to anyone—black, lesbian, whatever—is to exclude him or her from the jokes.

Plimpton might have found it useful to chew the fat with Mort Sahl, a Sixties survivor disowned by his peers because he declined to join in the knee-jerk bashing of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Sahl on stage makes a sobering contrast with Keillor: the better disposed an audience is toward him, the more perversely he sets out to turn them against him. *GQ*'s David Kamp makes a reference to what he calls "pre-ironic humor." I think that's the difficulty the *Review* has with Limbaugh. Rush is a pre-ironic show on pre-ironic radio stations: he means it. Keillor's is an ironic variety show on an ironic radio network. Its inverted commas seal it off from the world.

This isn't a call for more topical jokes. For one thing, I'd dispute whether there's any such thing. There are timeless jokes, and topical, passing politicians or celebrities who briefly attach themselves to them. If you wait long enough, as Bob Hope and his meticulous filing system have, you'll be able to recycle those Hoover Administration one-liners on some boob in the Clinton White House. Jokes hardly ever change; only the targets do. A few years ago, a couple of British tabloid gossip columnists concocted a romance between me and my friend and colleague Carol Thatcher, the Prime Minister's daughter. "Pity it's not true," a stand-up comic told me. "You'd have the ultimate music-hall mother-in-law act." Yes, indeed. But, in effect, he and his pals had beaten me to it. In the Eighties in Britain, there was an "alternative comedy" movement which refused to do mother-in-law jokes on the grounds that they were sexist. In practice, all the mother-in-law jokes were slipped in disguised as Mrs. Thatcher jokes. Misogyny was okay in anti-Thatcherite garb; ageism was fine applied to President Reagan. I think the mother-in-law jokes underestimated Mrs. Thatcher, just as the stupid jokes underestimated Ronald Reagan. According to the comics, the President was a B-movie bozo asleep on the job, which was just as well because, in the rare moments when he woke up, he was a warmonger. Eat your heart out, Dean Swift. There has to be more to it than that.

We don't have political humor, we have sound-bite humor, where each celebrity is permitted one trait: now, Bob Dole gets the age jokes, Ted Kennedy gets the drunk jokes. The President, being the President, is allowed two traits: he's fat and he's a womanizer. Halfway through a sluggish Top Ten list on the Clinton-Yeltsin summit, Letterman was forced to spell it out to the audience: "The one guy likes to eat, the

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other likes to drink. That's all you need to know." It's hard to know which is more pathetic: the jokes, the audience, the explanation. "The culture is less literate," says John Updike, and it echoes through "Whither Mirth?" like a vaudevillian catch phrase. Humor depends on a shared frame of reference: in Wodehouse, you can get Milton and "When the Silver of the Moonlight Meets the Lovelight in Your Eyes" within a single paragraph—though, if it's Bertie Wooster, the Milton allusion will usually be covered with "if that's the cove I'm thinking of" or some such. That kind of vernacular erudition is long gone. Who's Milton? The new lifeguard on "Baywatch"? David Kamp deplores "the pop culture reference that substitutes for a punchline." But what else remains? So on and on they roll, the trite allusions to "Leave It to Beaver," Twinkies, "Wheel of Fortune." And this stunted comedic vocabulary is so woefully undernourished that it barely sustains the airline luggage gags, never mind Bosnia or AIDS or Haiti, about all of which there are many fine jokes waiting to be made.

"We are not amused," said Queen Victoria, and history has not been kind to her. But, in a demotic culture, humor has an even harder time. The most decisive victory in the Cold War was the final exchange, when the Soviets announced they were replacing the Brezhnev Doctrine in the Warsaw Pact countries with the Frank Sinatra Doctrine—"You do it your way"—and Vice President Quayle, responding on behalf of the United States, said that was all very well but he hoped Soviet occupying forces would remember the Nancy Sinatra Doctrine—"These boots are made for walking." This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a titter. For, when everything's a joke, nothing is. Today, when public discourse is conducted in one-liners, the sovereign is his own court jester. And Queen Victoria's spiritual heirs are the joke-sifters on the sidelines, pursing their lips disapprovingly and genteely maintaining their standards. Feminists? Farrakhan? Oh, no, couldn't possibly, some people might conceivably not be amused.

Humor is always a delicate flower but it withers and dies in isolation. There's nothing more tedious than the saloon bore regaling us, unstoppably, with the one about the Englishman, the Irishman, the Scotsman/the Protestant, the Catholic, the Jew/the virgin, the faggot, the transvestite . . . Divorced from context, character, situation, they're just formulae. Unless he has Wodehouse's command over language, in rhyme and reason and rhythm, a good funny man has to have the capacity for cruelty. Not bitterness or sarcasm, just cruelty—like Evelyn Waugh in *A Handful of Dust*, when, after one hundred pages of bright young things larking about, the author turns the novel on a sixpence with Lady Brenda's momentary gratitude that it's her child and not her lover who's been killed. The more we fence comedy off from all the complications in society, the less likely we are to get anything that good ever again. The best advice in the issue is that of a local disc jockey to the schoolboy Trillin: "Well maybe you could be in your family business and then just be funny when people come in." He was picturing Trillin amusing customers in his diner or hardware store, but it works just as well when *The Miami Herald* asks you to be their new officially designated "funny writer": "Well maybe I could be a writer and then just be funny."

Old stories & new

Daniel Mark Epstein
The Boy in the Well and Other Poems.
The Overlook Press, 72 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Robert Richman

The Boy in the Well is Daniel Mark Epstein's sixth book of poems. The plain-spoken, almost prosaic language of these poems is very different from the lyrical, sumptuous writing of *Spirits* (1987), his last collection.

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Very different, too, are the subjects that Epstein trains his eye on in this volume. The love poems of *Spirits* have given way mainly to narratives on historical subjects and poems dealing with myth and legend: for example, "Phidias in Exile," "The Venus of Urbino," "The Ferryman" (this last is about Charon, the ferryman who escorts the dead over the river Styx to Hades). Not that an interest in history is new for Epstein. *No Vacancies in Hell* (1973), his first book, featured poems about nineteenth-century Baltimore (the poet hails from that city and now resides there), while *The Book of Fortune* (1982) contained poems about Thomas Edison and the Civil War. *The Boy in the Well* recalls these two earlier volumes in the same way that *Spirits* recalls *Young Men's Gold* (1978), love poems written in a lavish, at times wonderfully ornate language.

Although Epstein often delves deep into the past in *The Boy in the Well*, the book begins with poems that take place in the present and speak admiringly of those who can live in it unburdened by an acute sense of history. In "Lost Owl," the owl "singing from the oak tree in our yard" charms the poet's son but disturbs the poet because he is aware that such a vision has been "known for centuries as an omen of doom." The poet's knowledge of the past makes it hard to share his son's delight: to be "pastless" like the boy is better. In the book's eponymous poem, the boy of the title tumbles into a well and, although he does not survive the ordeal, can nevertheless marvel at the simple beauty of the stars. But to Epstein they are only "constellations acting out the old legends."

In "At Poe's Grave, Westminster Church," the book's opening poem, lovers walking through the graveyard are surrounded by the past, this time in the form of the buried dead. But the lovers' kiss in the "green island Necropolis" momentarily loosens the past's grip; the landscape vanishes into "a niche where there is no death,/ Past or future graveyard, no dominion/ But the bound and indivisible soul." Here the main emissary of the encroaching past is Poe. His spirit almost seems to say that death will have its day despite that sweet, lingering kiss.

In "The Inheritance," a candid poem about Epstein's father, family history is the threat:

> The night his heart stopped, and my father
> Drove the Cadillac haywire into a shadow,
> Nobody knew where he'd been. A heap of
> money
> Lay strewn across the front seat as if Death
> Had thrown it back in his face;
> In the ignition dangled his cryptic keys.
>
> My job: to find the locks for those keys
> And what they guarded, a puzzle my father
> Left scattered in his wake for me to face.
> I had to open the doors under his shadow
> Though one might easily open upon my
> death,
> A scene of vengeance, or a vault full of money.

To lessen the burden of these possibly shadowy doings would involve, as Epstein admits later on in the poem, getting his father's blessing or a proper farewell. But neither is possible. The past triumphs.

The personal past also triumphs in "The Book of Matches," a harrowing poem addressed to Epstein's ex-wife. Here, the poet conceives of his old union as a fire ravaging his house, begun in the basement with a book of matches, "each red tip a year of marriage." The blaze engulfs first the living-room and stairs, then the poet's books and bed; finally it "bursts into the children's room/ Furious to find them gone, no longer children/ Any more than we are bride and groom."

In "Epiphany," the remnants of another family's past—"carpets, lamps and bedsteads, kitchen range," and "games the children scarcely learned to play"—lie discarded on the street. Hope lives, though not now and not yet:

> Somewhere tonight a child is being told
> There will be a better home for him

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> In the new year, a warm bed and fresh linen,
> Constant love, and new toys for the old.

In the poems that follow, Epstein moves from confronting his personal past to the mythical past. Since he cannot turn himself at will into a "pastless" child or lover, and since his former life is a fire from which he barely escapes, Epstein turns to cultural history in search of a better, more useful "inheritance." This is not an ideal solution—we have already been shown the down side of so much knowledge—but he seems to have no choice.

The first old tale he invokes—a variation on a story by Edward Dunsany—concerns the dead. "The Ferryman" recounts how the dead would arrive over the centuries, often in great numbers, to be ferried across the river by Charon, his grim task a part of "the grand scheme the gods had made." Before long, though, the number starts to dwindle: at one point, not a single soul appears for a decade.

The appearance of the last hell-bound soul breaks the rower's indifference:

> Then one man walked the pier. His little shade
> Sat shivering on the skiff as it pushed off.
> Only one passenger: the gods know best.
> The weary ferryman rowed on and on
> And the river sighed the way Grief in the dawn
> Of ages moaned and sighed among her sisters,
> A song that could not die like the echoes
> Of human sorrow failing on the earth,
> Though it was old as Time and Charon's pain.
>
> From the slow river the boat loomed to the
> coast
> Of Hades. The lone passenger stepped ashore
> As Charon turned his boat toward the world.
> "But wait, I am the last," said the new ghost
> Alarmed by Charon's face against the sky—
> For no one had ever made him smile before,
> No one had ever seen the ferryman cry.

"The past," in the form of a story salvaged from it, helps alter the perception of death as something incurably bleak. More important, though, the poem suggests that Epstein, too, might be on the verge of considering ways of breaking the hard shell of indifference he had developed from dealing with his dead.

"The Great Pyramid" contains a gloss on the whole business of using others' words to get one going. "Centuries before the flood," Epstein writes, "a king/ Dreamed the earth turned over, burying/ Everyone." When the king learns from his priest that the stars "foretold the deluge," he "ordained the pyramid." The priest's words "became a juggernaut," prompting the king to build the pyramid—much the way old stories and other writers' words inspire Epstein to build his "edifice" of words. (Besides "The Ferryman" and the poems based on unattributed tales, two poems are inspired by Mallarmé, while another is based on a Sephardic tale.) For this poet, at least, words motivate as much as deeds do; and the objects created by men so inspired—poems, sculptures, a pyramid (with "deepest man-made night" at its core)—are admired as much as any natural phenomenon. When we read in "Phidias in Exile" that the great sculptor of antiquity was accused by rivals of stealing gold, we can't help but smile: Epstein, too, borrows the "gold" of others for his poetry.

In "The Hanging Gardens," what inspires the Babylonian king to build his garden is his wife's "desire . . . for the country of her youth." What the queen wants, in short, is a zone of bliss free from the corrupting reach of the past, whether it be her own past or history proper. These myth-laden poems of Epstein's have a similar function: they provide shields from a painful present.

Indeed, it isn't until "Diana," toward the end of the book, that the present surfaces again at all. Here, in a poem addressed to a new love, Epstein writes: "All day you seemed fearful of me,/ Your wide, brave gaze/ Wavering, haunted." The source of fear turns out to be his new beloved's dream the previous night in which the poet, "a country hunter with a bow," chased her, a doe, through the woods:

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I thought of the old story, Actaeon,
And one lesson seemed plain enough.
If you have never been in love
Like this, or thought of children
Dividing your ecstatic solitude,
You must feel like the hunter hunted.
Running from the game you have pursued.

Given *his* history, of course, Epstein is probably as afraid of any new promise of love as she! But for the first time in quite a while, the past doesn't dominate. In fact, "Diana" ends with a vision recalling the hanging gardens, but that is wholly of today: "I thought I'd broached a shrine of innocence/ The day you took me home and I first saw// Your childhood dolls kept in a cabinet."

The shrines of innocence Epstein has been honoring are finally transformed into a reality. A trying present forced the poet to seek refuge in the past, which in turn prompted him to embrace the present when it, too, finally reappeared. Thanks to his new love, Epstein can see the world again, and be inspired by *it*, for a change, not just by stories or words: he has come full circle.

"Helen," the last poem in the book, doesn't refer to Helen of Troy, but that is who we think of when we start to read:

"Tell us a love story,"
Pleaded the class in chorus.

"Our lessons are all done,
Now don't lecture or bore us,"

They prattled, except for one,
Helen, whose gaze looked lost
In the maze of willow branches,
The girl the boys liked most

For the faraway blue of her eyes
And brown hair straight as rain.
"Tell us a love story, please,"
They begged the teacher again.

He frowned and longed for the bell,
Saying, "All the love stories I know
End in heartache, or death—"
Then Helen, from the back row

Called at last from her daydream
In the voice of an innocent lover,
"Tell us a love story anyway
And stop before it is over."

We think of the myth, but not for long. For the advice of this beautiful, utterly unwise girl beats anything Epstein ever encountered in a book: to "stop" his own love story "before it is over." What better way to repudiate the specter of death looming in that first poem set at the grave of Poe? What better way to put in perspective (though not reject) all that knowledge accumulated in his mind? What better way to end such a thoughtful, moving story?

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Letters

Dennett's dangerous idea

To the Editors:

The appearance in your pages of Phillip E. Johnson's review of Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (October 1995) is disappointing. It makes the resurgent claim (from both ends of the political spectrum) that evolutionary biology is a tissue of errors and evasions. Far from a serious response to Mr. Dennett, the piece is a logic-chopping attack on science. *The New Criterion* has taken, heretofore, thoughtful positions on science and reason. Recognizing that, and the certainty that more will be needed as the culture wars continue, I feel compelled to remonstrate.

The "argument" is a précis of the anti-evolutionism Mr. Johnson peddles, much to the delight of down-home, young-earth creationists even though he does not go so far as to endorse their biblical literalism. It is not new: Johnson's fullest exposition, the volume *Darwin on Trial* (1991), is a rehash of Norman Macbeth's *Darwin Retried* (1973). As Stephen J. Gould has observed, lawyer Macbeth's try was better than lawyer Johnson's; and Mr. Macbeth's line of argument antedates his book by a century.

Scientific materialism, says Johnson, crippled by the exclusion of "mind," has no alternative to descent with modification and without "design"—that is, to "Darwinism." Perforce it takes what it can get. But: (misrepresenting Thomas Kuhn, as anti-science does) Darwinism is just a "paradigm"; theism is another, with equal rights. The materialist-scientific paradigm is flawed in fact and interpretation; it fails to explain such simplicities as the origin of life; ergo, it is no better than theism, which includes "mind," and "design" (and is, presumably, error-free). Thus science classrooms must not be used for indoctrination against theism. But: this reasonable-sounding requirement is both disingenuous and impractical, since any religionist can argue, on any point of science, that it violates his beliefs and is therefore indoctrination.

I can take here only a few sentences from one paragraph of the Johnsonian argument, an example for which there are many matches. Thus, on a recent book by philosopher John Searle (*The Construction of Social Reality*), for whom one sign of a good grip on reality is recognition that we (the human species) have evolved from non-human ancestors:

> Searle undermines his whole project by virtually ordering his readers not to notice that scientific materialism and Darwinism are themselves socially constructed doctrines rather than objective facts . . . Darwinism is perfectly secure when it is regarded as a deduction from materialism, but remarkably insecure when it is subjected to empirical testing. Given that what we most respect about science is its fidelity to the principle that empirical testing is what really matters, why should philosophers allow scientists to tell them that they must accept assumptions that don't pass the empirical test?

This is misconstruction of Searle with an appended lie about the facts of biology. Yes, Darwinism and materialism are socially-constructed doctrines. Every "ism" is; thus theism. But "doc-

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trines" are constructed upon facts, or what are taken to be facts, or lied about as facts. Mr. Searle's point is that there are two kinds of facts, brute facts and social facts. The latter may be "constructed" on the basis of the former; but the reverse, never! Snow on Mt. Everest is a brute fact. A dollar bill as legal tender is a social fact. For Searle evolution is a brute fact.

It is no longer a "doctrine." A hundred years of research, much of it early on aimed at disproof, have turned it into as brute a biological fact as we have. Human evolution was a doctrine until every attempted test of it (short of reproducing it in the laboratory, which is impossible) was passed. Every test of its opposite failed. Then it became a fact. Most religions in America accept it. Whether or not God started things off, or looks in from time to time, doesn't alter the fact. "Scientific" creationists, exploiting the sensation-hunger of the media, camouflage this.

More important: nothing in empirical science, at least since the 1860s, makes Darwinism "remarkably insecure." Mr. Johnson's arguments (elsewhere: none are given in *The New Criterion*!) are creationist claims, old scientific squabbles, exaggerations of technical disagreements or isolated musings from scientists who are Darwinists. Rather than "remarkably insecure," evolution—by natural selection and other physical mechanisms—is remarkably secure.

During the past thirty years, massive new evidence has appeared. No creationist will tell you about the findings of the Gehring group in Switzerland, for example: nearly identical genes, obviously related by descent, control development of the eye in flies, mice, and men. Yet it was the eye for which Archdeacon William Paley resurrected, in 1802, the Argument from Design! If and when, decades from now, creationists get around to it, they will instead pounce upon words in this literature to the effect that "convergence," an old idea in evolutionary biology, may not to be needed to explain the evolution of eyes. They will ignore the real message: "design" is meaningless.

Mr. Johnson has every right to his religion and to dispute Dennett's views on education, but no right to assert that there are ghastly evidentiary flaws in biology, or, what is worse, that all the scientists from Aachen to Zhu-Zhou, driven by political pressure, conspire to keep it a secret. That is the burden of his essay, and it is false. The investigator who found a serious flaw in evolutionary biology would be a celebrity. There isn't one. Ritual misappropriation of Kuhn and "paradigm shifts," or of early Popper, scoring points against evolution, makes for celebrity only among those who mine the literature of biology for damaging quotations.

The New Criterion, generally so sound on relativistic modishness, deserved better.

Paul R. Gross
Falmouth, MA

Phillip E. Johnson replies:

"Darwinism" is the doctrine that all living organisms evolved from simpler ancestors by a combination of random genetic changes and natural selection. Because these are undirected material mechanisms, Darwinists like Daniel Dennett infer that there is no need to invoke a pre-existing mind to account for the seemingly designed features of organisms. By extending this logic "all the way up and all the way down," Darwinian materialists conclude that God is a figment of the human imagination, that the mind is reducible to material processes in the brain, and that the universe is purposeless and amoral.

It is this materialist reasoning that, in the words of Mr. Dennett's title, makes Darwin's idea dangerous—and interesting. In contrast, a vague claim that says only that organisms somehow "evolved" implies nothing about the reality of God or the nature of mind. That is why the Darwinian *mechanism* is all important, and why John Searle said that philosophers must assume that humans and their minds evolved *by natural selection*. The theory that a known material mechanism made the mind, along with all the other complex organs of the body, provides atheistic materialists with a viable creation story.

Mr. Gross should make some effort to understand the issues before recklessly tossing around words like "lie," and telling me that I have "no right" to question orthodoxy. The premise of Mr. Dennett's book is that some eminent scien-

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tists, all of whom believe in "evolution," have doubts about the adequacy or importance of the Darwinian mechanism, especially when it comes to the mind. Mr. Dennett tends to think that this is because they flinch at the philosophical implications. It is to their credit if they do flinch, since the philosophical implications of Darwinism are appalling, but I think some of them may also have noticed the absence of empirical evidence that the Darwinian mechanism actually has the fantastic creative power that Darwinists claim for it. Of course I might be wrong, but what exactly *is* the evidence that proves that natural selection can make a mind—or any complex organ?

Instead of producing the evidence, Mr. Gross employs a standard Darwinian trick. First, he identifies Darwinism and natural selection with "evolution," a vague term that implies no particular mechanism. Next, he identifies "evolution" with common features that might be inherited from a hypothetical ancestor. With this logic in place, the existence of a common feature seems like a demonstration of the creative power of natural selection. No wonder Darwinists, like their philosophical cousins the Freudians and Marxists, think that everything they observe confirms their ideology. By similar logic we could prove that, since the same kinds of machines are used to build cars and airplanes, the machines were not designed by engineers.

The very example which Mr. Gross cites illustrates how a pseudoscience can cite even the most unexpected experimental results as "just what our theory predicts." Standard Darwinian doctrine says that the genes regulating eye development of insects and mammals must have evolved independently, because the eyes themselves are fundamentally dissimilar. When a similar gene affecting eye development in both groups was found, Stephen Jay Gould described this discovery in his "Natural History" column (*Nature*, December 1994) as astonishing, because Darwinian theory predicted that natural selection would "tailor all initially common genetic lineages to the specific uses of each lineage." Hence Gross is citing as a confirmation of "evolution" (and thus of the power of natural selection to craft an eye) a discovery that actually falsified an important prediction of the Darwinian theory. The discovery provides no support whatever for Gross's preposterous statement that "design" is meaningless. If the biologists were not such ardent materialists, they would describe the similarity of the regulatory genes as an example of common design.

Readers who want to know what molecular biology really teaches about the Darwinian mechanism and design should look for Michael Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box*, forthcoming this summer from Free Press. Behe shows that the complexity of eyes and other biological systems at the molecular level is irreducible, and observes that no scientist has published a paper in the professional literature showing how a complex molecular system could develop gradually by an undirected material mechanism. Behind all that dogmatism about the power of natural selection lies only bluster, not evidence.

Finally, Darwinian materialism is the foundation of that "relativistic modishness" on value questions that Gross rightly deplores. Richard Dawkins writes that the Darwinian universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication is one where "there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference." John Maynard Smith concurs that, on Darwinian principles, "there is simply no source whence absolute morality could come." Richard Rorty concludes that the philosopher's duty to "keep faith with Darwin" requires abandoning the goal of objective truth, because "The idea that one species of organism is, unlike all the others, oriented not just towards its own increased prosperity but toward Truth is as un-Darwinian as the idea that every human being has a built-in moral compass." The cure for relativism is for philosophers to rediscover that their duty is to keep faith with Truth rather than with Darwin.

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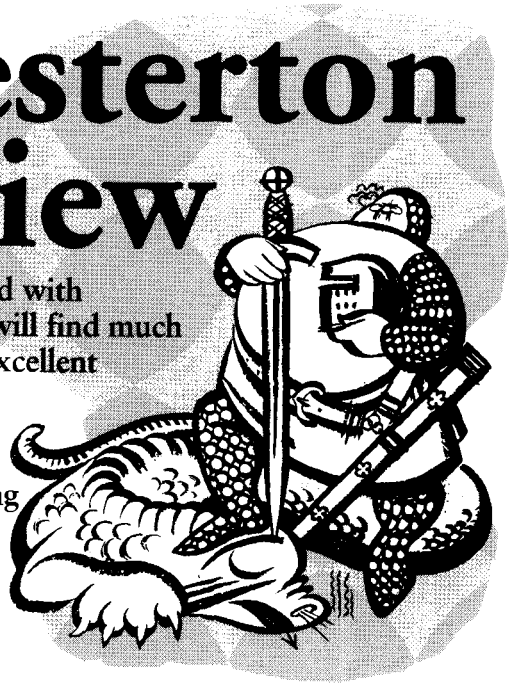

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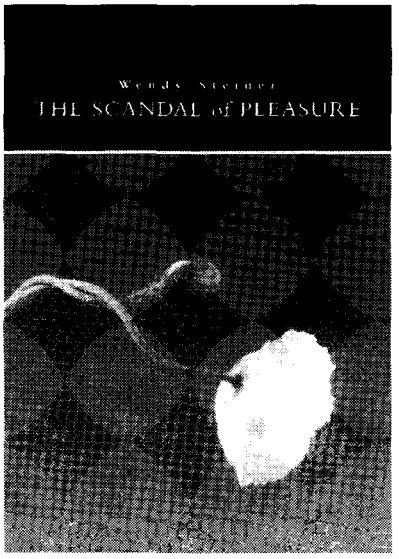

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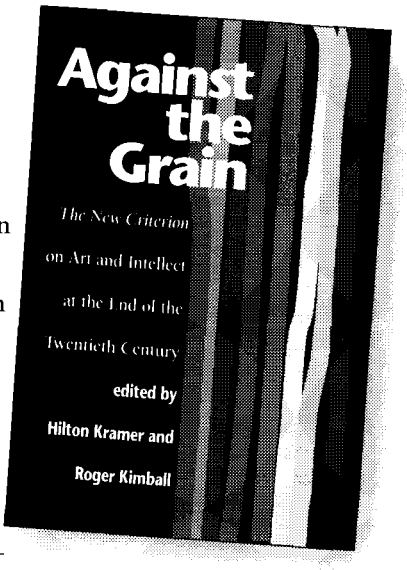
A cornucopia of brilliant criticism from the pages of *The New Criterion*

Against the Grain

The New Criterion on Art and Intellect at the End of the Twentieth Century

edited by Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball



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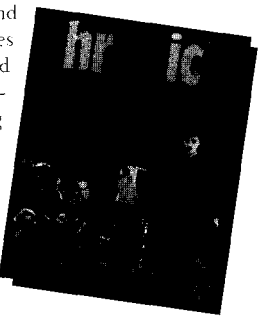

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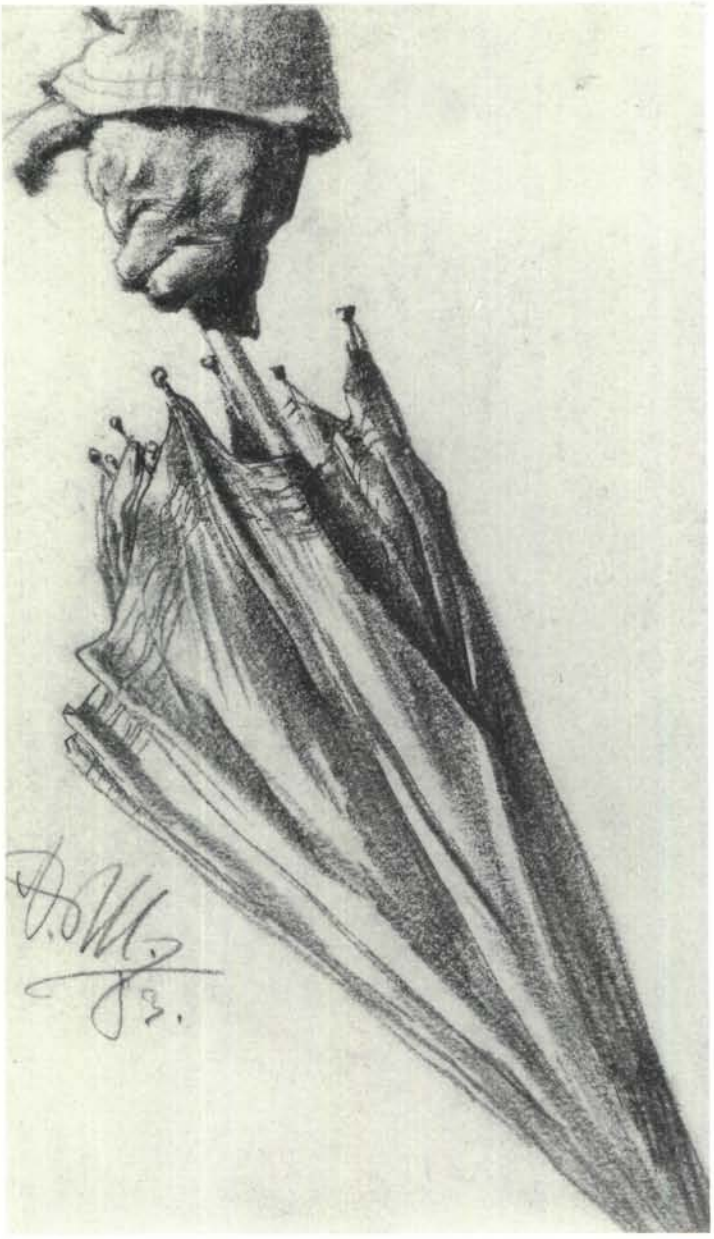

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